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CHARLOTTE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

MR. SMITH: a Part of his Life.

THE BABY'S GRANDMOTHER.

COUSINS.

TROUBLESOME DAUGHTERS.

PAULINE.

DICK NETHERBY.

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THE INTRUDERS.

ONE OF OURSELVES.

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.,

LONDON, NEW YORK, AND BOMBAY.

CHARLOTTE

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BY

L. B. WALFORD

AUTHOR OF "MR. SMITH: A PART OF HIS LIFE," "THE BABY'S GRANDMOTHER,"
ONE OF OURSELVES," ETC., ETC., ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

THE SOVEREIGN AND HER COURT.

IT was a common little house enough—but it became a 'bijou residence' being situated in Charles Street, Mayfair.

It had a poor little doorstep—but that doorstep was the goal for many feet. It had a small, cramped, overfurnished drawing-room—but in that drawing-room sat Charlotte.

Let us leave trifles alone and get on to Charlotte.

Charlotte, at the time we write of, had already made her mark, and was a personage both in her own world and out of it. Not only was she well known, but a good deal better known than she herself in the least suspected, since it is certain that the stupidest people find out the cleverest sooner or later, and the finders-out run to tell each other.

The only difference—and we insist upon it that a difference did exist betwixt this young lady in her heyday and the thousand-and-one others of her kind—lay in the fact that being laid bare, stripped, if you will, of all illusion, Charlotte remained Charlotte, and a power in the land. Those who knew her best, who knew her in and out, who saw and heard and silently condemned from day to day, still loved and would never cease to love.

Premising this, let us step within, for we are waiting

admittance beneath the awning on the doorstep—and now the door is opened, and we can escape from a blazing sun that beats fiercely down from a July sky, into the deep and welcome shadow within.

It is Sunday afternoon, and there are not a few hats in the hall, each looking on the other with an evil eye. A murmur of voices furthermore betokens a full levee above. Indeed, as we catch our first glimpse through the opening doorway from the landing outside, what with the shade cast by the sun-blinds over the balcony, and the tall screen that barricades the tea-table, and the flower-stands, and the frock-coated figures standing and leaning and perching everywhere, it might be a veritable Black Hole of Calcutta we see within—and unless it be so at this particular hour of this particular day of the week, Miss Sunning feels herself ill-used.

When Charlotte desires seclusion she can have it—(mind you make no mistake about that, you artless John Thomas)—but when your young lady's doors stand open, they ought never to be shut; they ought to be on the swing all the time.

The Black Hole, however, is in one respect no fair comparison, and we ask Charlotte's pardon for it. She is a lover of open windows; and though the air of the apartment is heavy with the perfume of violets and mignonette, and though there are many to breathe it, and tea steaming up into it, still it comes wafted in from the illimitable without, freely and endlessly. Charlotte sits by the open casement, and her visitors overflow into the balcony.

Charlotte knows exactly where to sit. She knows it as she knows many things, primarily by instinct, secondly by experience. The sun's rays may be excluded from her presence, but there are gleams, or, to be strictly correct, there is an outer gleam, against

which her rich brown hair burns like a beech-bank in September.

The colouring is natural, and has been noted from earliest days. A great painter once painted it. The wave is also natural, and you would know this at a glance. As a child Charlotte had a curly head, and called it her 'fuzz-bush'; she still does so, though the fuzz is toned down, and its yellow gold has deepened into the varying shades above mentioned.

As we intend to be quite frank with our readers, so that they shall be at no disadvantage through only being introduced by us to Miss Charlotte Sunning, not taken into confidence by admirers who know everything about her, and of whom many have been educated by herself on the subject of her 'points,' we can give our positive assurance that the hair is really beautiful hair, and whether as now arranged in the newest fashion, or flowing loose, as it has been seen in confidence never mind by whom, is worthy of all admiration. Charlotte, a good judge, dispassionately admires it—and she does not admire everything about herself. She knows wherein she fails.

But she does not fail in the eyes; they are large, grey, and liquid, forever catching things. Accordingly this is a fruitful source of lamentation, and young Tarporley asserts that he is the only man of his set who has not at some time or other been ordered to take something out of Miss Sunning's eyes. Tarpy says it is unfair. He gave himself away too early in the day, and was never worth wasting time upon.

For the same reason he has heard no complaints of other things—the teeth, for instance; those even, pearly fangs, whose enamel is so detestably delicate that they are a perfect revenue to Charlotte's dentist. She is great upon her dentist, and the awful times she has in

his torture-chamber while he rummages round. She is sure he is going to hook out a 'molar' every minute—to 'remove' one, he calls it, he has such a sweet and soothing vocabulary—and though it does not appear that these apprehensions are ever justified, it is interesting to hear about them. N.B.—The tale of course is illustrated; no one has a prettier set of teeth or a more perfectly-shaped jaw, or fuller, redder lips than this Charlotte of our history.

We are getting on, but we have jumped the nose. It is not much of a nose, to tell the truth, being somewhat fleshy and apt at times to borrow a tint from either cheek—for which reason it has never yet been known to figure in confidences. Still, the nostrils are fine, expansive, and dilate under excitement; there are plenty of worse noses; frankly, we think Charlotte need not condemn it as she does, in private.

She also condemns in her own mind, and to Kitty, who doesn't count, the fulness of her cheek and throat. "I shall be too fat by-and-bye," she says.

And it may be so, but at present there is only a Hebe-like outline, in keeping with the milk-white neck and rounded shoulder; and when we have mentioned that to the above charms are added a bust and waist, nay a whole form so finely moulded on generous lines that detraction itself can find no flaw, it will be seen that we have before us a very splendid young woman indeed, always taking into account that from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot this splendid Charlotte is splendidly arrayed. No one has a deeper contempt for the insensate idea of 'beauty unadorned' than Miss Charlotte Sunning.

To-day, on this sweltering July day, a pale-tinted gauze with cobweb laces is a very dream of coolness. It falls apart at the throat and wrists.

There are delicately embroidered slippers, and gossamer-like stockings visible at intervals beneath the ruffled edges of the skirt. There are chains and bangles and rattle-traps shining and jangling hither and thither. There is a bunch of flame-coloured briar roses in the belt; the belt is studded with gems. A small fan, purloined from her mother's hoards, and a pretty adjunct in Charlotte's slim fingers, completes the picture we present to our readers, and they need not fear that we shall ever again recur to it. Charlotte, once seen, makes or ought to make her own impression, and if she has failed to do so in the present instance, no further attempt would be of any use.

Let us return to Mrs. Sunning's drawing-room.

You did not know there was a Mrs. Sunning? Oh, but there is, and she would be very indignant if she heard such a remark, I assure you. She is a vain, egotistical little body, who won't be kept in the background by anybody but Charlotte, and struggles with her sometimes. To other people it is 'Charlotte—Charlotte—Charlotte' all day long.

Hum-hum goes the talk; it cannot be called conversation; neither of the ladies, both of whom have brains, would dignify it by the name of such—but they suit themselves to their company, and while Charlotte is witty and light, Mrs. Sunning is Sabbatically serious, and refers to the book on her knee. She knows she is talking nonsense about it, having taken two looks and put it down while waiting for the sound of the first door-bell—she is too clever a woman and too much of a reader to pass off crude commonplaces except where they will fall harmlessly—but to be sure Colonel Blake, to whom even a newspaper is a bore, thinks it all monstrous fine, and as he will forget the name ere he goes from the door, the lady is safe.

The elderly colonel is on one side of Mrs. Sunning, and a shy stripling, whose first appearance in the house it is, tries hard to look content upon the other.

When he arrived there was only one hat in the hall, and oh! how cool and shady looked the little room, a veritable bower of bliss to his enchanted eyes. An Adam is already in possession of the Eden it is true, but Eve is equal to more Adams than one; and so, if he may only share her smiles——? He does for the space of ten minutes.

Then somehow, he hardly knows how, he begins to drift. His anchor no longer grips where he first threw it down. The chair that was his is not even his supplanter's now. He has no chair at all.

At this juncture Gerald, the unfortunate, should have made for the balcony, and established himself thereon; but being by nature gentle, and by breeding courteous, he suffers himself to be elbowed to the rear, and wakes up too late to the reality of his lot, a hapless outcast, doomed to smile inanely at Charlotte's mother.

The older man smiles also; more steadily and continuously than the young one. Habit and experience make that stereotyped grin easy; also the bend of the neck and mask of deep attention.

In reality such mind as the old fellow possesses is employed in mastering the present scene for future reference. He likes to be 'in the know'. It is quite a matter of importance with him whether there are only the usual set around Charlotte's tea-table or whether she has any new annexations. Great would be the boy Gerald's wrath and dire his shame if he knew that he was 'spotted,' had been 'spotted' on the instant, but is not deemed worth a second thought. What Colonel Blake is engaged in pondering out is the exact position

occupied by Sir George Tregillis at the moment. Is he past, present, or future?

The colonel inclines to past, judging from various well-established symptoms; yet he is doubtful because—and he is busy worrying out the ‘because’ as he bows and bends beneath Mrs. Sunning’s sustained volubility.

It is no wonder an onlooker is puzzled, since the person most concerned is frankly bothered to know his own position. Sir George is a great friend of Charlotte’s, and has not the very slightest idea whether, given the chance, he desires to be anything more or not. The point he debates with himself is not what he wishes, but what she means him to wish—and if Colonel Blake or any one else could put him in the way of unravelling that riddle he would be very much obliged. Meantime, with the face of a sphinx, he ~~chumps~~ ^{chumps} sweet biscuits, sips sweeter tea, and phlegmatically entrenches himself behind his cup till things develop. Miss Sunning is looking lovely, and he has quite as much of her attention as is bestowed upon any one else.

There are one or two others present who may by-and-bye play their parts in these pages, but just now they merely form a background of the ordinary kind—some good-looking, some not, but all cut from the same cloth. Charlotte keeps them in play with her ready tongue, now directed to one, now to the other. You would say she is in her element; no one would guess, not even her mother, that all the time she is watching, watching—and that the person for whom she watches never comes.

She is amazed, disappointed, furious at last beneath her smiles. It has never dawned upon her that she is to be baulked like this, and as the truth slowly sets in to her incredulous vision, she recalls with increasing

vividness of recollection certain words and looks, pointed enough in all conscience, and sets her teeth.

Tregillis, who has adventured a harmless nothing, finds it met with a snap, ponders a moment, and thinks it is getting late.

As he rises, the others also straighten themselves for departure, and poor Gerald Brown from the background wonders whether he may not snatch one crumb of comfort at the eleventh hour, to compensate for all his previous torments. A kind word at the last would infallibly bring him back another day with renewed hopes.

He gets it—but so do the others. They all get something; either it is a murmur of future meetings, or a message to womenfolk, or a vague promise: "Only it's Sunday, and I never make engagements on Sunday: it's not proper," demurely alleges Miss Sunning, finding herself on the brink of a precipice; for she had all but agreed to a piteous appeal, and though she is an adept at backing out when backing out is necessary, on the present occasion she may as well not back in—and one by one they vanish through the doorway, and down the little staircase, and at last every footfall has ceased, and mother and daughter are alone.

Do you think that you are now going to see and hear something new and funny? You take it for granted, don't you, that Charlotte will yawn and frown, and generally enact the stereotyped damsel with the carefully bottled-up temper, warranted only to explode in the seclusion of the domestic circle? Then all we can tell you is that you will be agreeably surprised; Charlotte has about as much idea of taking her mother into confidence when she is vexed and chagrined, as of letting herself go in the presence of her Sovereign; besides, it is not her temper that ever troubles our

young lady. You will find out presently what is the real lion in her path which has to be forever kept in leash, forever threatening disaster. For the present let it suffice to hint that the beast is there, and that Charlotte knows it and dreads it.

"A most successful afternoon, Charlotte."

Charlotte owns that the afternoon has been tolerable.

"Fifteen," recounts Mrs. Sunning, triumphantly; "and I don't believe another could have got in if he had tried."

"He didn't try, at all events." There is a suspicion of something behind Charlotte's laugh, but it is unperceived by her mother.

"I suppose you like to have such a number," the latter runs on, "and that they don't mind having to sit on the arms of chairs and things, else it really does make this little bit of a room terribly hot; and they crowded out the light too, such light as there was."

"Making it just the proper shade for my dear and honoured mamma. I don't mind the garish day," observes Charlotte, slyly, "but methinks a mellow softening of the sunshine suits——"

"Nonsense. I never see that it makes any difference. One has to face it out of doors, and as to all the little I do, compared with others—my dear Charlotte," eagerly, "if you had only *seen* Mrs. Atkinson this morning! And in church; positively in church! Now I do think that amount in the early morning *is* indecent, even if it were *not* for church. I assure you she was——"

"I know what she was, very well. I was there."

"There? You? Not near me?"

"Close. And by consequence close to Mrs. Atkinson; and both she and you fidgeted to such an extent, that——"

"It was the heat, my dear; the heat."

"You must sit somewhere else if it is as hot next Sunday. Tarpy says his mother sits in the side aisle. Tarpy seemed to know all about it. He says the seats are very comfortable, for he asked her."

"What made you speak about church?"

"I always speak about church on Sundays. I give them bits out of the sermon. My discourse is most improving, I assure you."

"Did you repeat any of to-day's sermon?" said Mrs. Sunning, with some significance. "It would have suited your audience very well."

"Oh, it did. Sir George has promised to go and hear for himself, and Tarpy will make his mother's heart to sing for joy by dancing attendance on her there next Sunday—or so he says at present. Away from my influence he may be tempted and fall. Tarpy is terribly unregenerate."

Mrs. Sunning frowned a little. "I do think, Charlotte——"

"Well?" said Charlotte.

Her tone was dry, and she waited some time before she spoke at all.

"There are some things one ought not to make game of," rejoined her mother, uneasily. "I am sure you never learned to talk of religion from me in any way—in any way——" hesitating.

"No, not in *any* way," said Charlotte, coolly. "Consequens, I had to teach myself; and to strike out my own line besides. I am very fond of religion, and I like my friends to be so too. I let them know this. They don't take to it kindly at first, I am afraid; but they improve. Now, if you had been doing your part, you would have whipped up a recruit in that silly old Blake, who, I daresay, couldn't get down on

his knees if he tried, but he could have a high has-sock——”

“Charlotte! Charlotte!”

“And if he wants to shirk the collection, as of course he would, he need only go out before the sermon as you do.”

“It is not because I want to shirk the collection. One can always put in one’s shilling at the door.”

“One can—but one doesn’t. One passes by on the other side occasionally, especially when one is not aware that one’s daughter is behind.”

Mrs. Sunning reddened in spite of herself. “You catch me on a day when I happened to have left my purse—at least I had it, but nothing small enough in it. I really cannot afford to give half-crowns and shillings——”

“Nor even sixpences. You were hit rather hard from the pulpit the other day, mum, with your mixture of satin and lace and threepenny-bits. Poor mother, it was too bad to show you up like that. Says I to myself, says I, ‘Save us and bless us, if that ain’t my old ’ooman to the life!’”

“I should have more to give if I had less to spend—upon you,” retorted Mrs. Sunning, indignantly. “You will go to the most expensive people——”

“Oh yes, yes—we know all about that. The threepenny-bits will put that right, and we’ll say no more about them. Call quits. Now I must be off to dress.”

“To dress? Where are you going?”

“To dine with Jacky Newbolt at Ranelagh. Jacky is a dear. She thinks it quite wicked, but she goes to please me.”

“Who invited you?”

“Some one, my dear. We don’t go without knowing who we are to feed with.”

"I don't like these Sunday club dinners, Charlotte; I really don't. I'm sure your father——" but Charlotte had nodded and flown.

For a moment her mother stood still looking at the door, then:—

"All girls do it," murmured she, apologetically, to her fragment of a conscience; "at any rate, it is no use *my* saying anything. Charlotte is quite beyond me. If I were to attempt to hold her in, she would only tell me less than she does; and certainly things are changed since I was a girl. No one thinks anything of it now, except the few old-fashioned people who have no daughters—at least not daughters like mine. Henrietta, for instance. It is all very well for her," glancing round upon the disordered room, whose aspect breathed at every pore Charlotte's triumphs and by reflection her own.

"She can't help it, poor child." Now the fond parent was herself again. "They *will* come after her—as I tell Henrietta. I only hope that isn't Henrietta"—with a start of apprehension, as an untimely door-bell rang at the moment. "If it is?"—and she was out upon the landing listening with both ears on the stretch, the while she conned rapidly the situation in her mind.

How to stop Henrietta, supposing it were Henrietta? Henrietta must *not* be let in; no, not if she herself had to go down and—yes, yes, a happy thought——

"Is that you, dear Etta?" from the lowest step of the staircase. "Are you come for me?" cries the little widow, fluttering forward ~~all~~ affectionate welcome, and her sister-in-law, a portly personage, filling up the greater part of the doorway, is caught and stopped there by the reception.

"You are on your way to evening service, I am sure?" runs on Mrs. Sunning, briskly, "and you have a seat for

me? I know you have. You dear creature, to think of it. I was wondering if I should ever get in, for there is always such a crowd when Alban preaches; and I almost had it on my mind to run round and see if you would have room for me. Charlotte, poor child, has such a headache——”

“I did not expect her to come,” said Lady Henrietta, bluntly. “But you were disappointed last time Alban preached, and I thought if I came early I might catch you before you went anywhere else.”

“And you have. Just caught me. I was actually on my way upstairs to put on my bonnet. Do come in here,” pushing open the dining-room door, “and wait three minutes—shan’t be more—while I fly up.”

“Is Charlotte in the drawing-room? Kitty told me to ask her——”

“She has gone to her room, I’m afraid, dear. And it is such a long, long way up. Shall I give a message?”

“Kitty thought she might like to come in for supper. We don’t have dinner on Sundays, you know. The boys’ friend, Major Lance, is coming; no one else.”

“I will tell her, but I am really afraid—however, I will tell her, and she can judge for herself. Perhaps it would do her good to go out” (it will be seen that the speaker was an expert in her art)—“so, one minute, dear Etta, and I shall be with you again”—and the dining-room door is safely closed, but outside Mrs. Sunning’s face changes.

What a nuisance this is. She had meant to have such a delicious evening of solitude and Zola. Zola has been lying perdu during the afternoon, while the serious book was openly flaunted, absolutely thrust under the nose of everybody—but the latter’s day is over for the present, and it is back on the book table, where it will remain undisturbed for another week.

Directly Charlotte said she was going out, Charlotte's mother had re-arranged her own mental programme—(the two are Box and Cox on Sunday evenings)—and, to tell the truth, it is always a secret joy to Mrs. Sunning when she can have the house to herself on these occasions.

First of all she issues the strictest orders to admit nobody, nobody under any pretext; then she takes off her smart dress, and gets into the oldest and easiest of tea-gowns, establishes herself on the drawing-room sofa, the little sofa by the window which Charlotte calls hers, but which her mother equally loves and gets when she can; and what with her book—never mind what book, be sure it is stiff and strong, and invisible except at such times—and coffee, with a plate of cold chicken and a few other dainty remnants of luncheon brought up on a tray at eight o'clock—she will enjoy herself to the top of her bent.

"Mother likes to be quiet on Sunday evenings," says Charlotte, fencing off her aunt Henrietta, who otherwise would pop in still more frequently than she does.

"I daresay she's tired," replies aunt Hen, placidly. Henny-Penny, as Charlotte calls her, has her doubts about her niece, but the good soul is quite taken in by Charlotte's parent—and this is wonderful, considering that Charlotte is out and out the cleverer of the two.

But then, perhaps, she does not take the same pains.

Accordingly we hear now her worthy ladyship quite undisguisedly and unconcernedly saying she does not expect mademoiselle's company at church—and we can guess the mental comment which accompanies the words—while with equal sincerity she makes her offer to madame—and upon my word, dear reader, had she known it, Charlotte would have been quite as likely to benefit by the prospective pulpit eloquence as her mother, had

the evening found her unprovided with other entertainment.

But all this time the widow with a lagging step is ruefully trailing upstairs, wishing and wishing she could think of anything which would send away that dear, tiresome woman who *will* always do her kindnesses she does not want, and who if she were any one but an earl's daughter and the solid, rich, important member of the family, would be much more easily disposed of.

As it is, she would not offend Henrietta for the world, and she really does like—at least she does not like, but she appreciates at a distinct market value—Henrietta's habit of dropping in on Sunday evenings, and carrying her off to occupy the vacant bit of red cushion by her ladyship's side in church. She is seen by many people there.

Only it is such a hot evening, and she had so hoped that the time for Henrietta's door-bell had gone by!

~~and~~ "I am really not strong enough to be always on the 'go,'" she murmurs, plaintively. "I ought to be allowed *some* rest. If only I had had a moment to think of that—but I foolishly allowed myself to appear delighted, and then it was impossible to turn round all of a sudden and not be fit to go out!"

By this time she has reached her own room, and there is the cool, loose tea-gown laid out by Kitchin, most attentive of maids, whose evening out it is—and how comfortably could Kitchin's mistress have slipped into it, and exchanged her tight little beaded, rosetted shoes for the old, easy slippers, if only there had been no waiting figure in the dining-room below!

She sighs, and slowly, very slowly, opens the wardrobe to take out again the bonnet and scarf which she had fondly hoped to need no more that day.

Her hair is not arranged to suit the bonnet—a fresh grievance.

Kitchin had dressed it elaborately for the afternoon; becomingly too, for the brown locks are still abundant and easy to puff—but there is no central knot, and now the flowered and feathered ‘toque’ has a bad time of it—nothing to lay hold of. It cannot be made to set straight, despite a furious onslaught of long pins. They simply stick out head and point and do no business.

Again and again with nervous, irritated fingers, the hapless lady dives inside, but still whenever she shakes her head, the gay erection shakes independently with still more vigorous action; until in desperation she seizes it, pulls it drunkenwise right down over one ear, and makes a face at herself to complete the picture.

How unutterably odious and old she looks! And what a hideous, hideous ‘toque’ it is. Can she not put on anything else? But people are so smart at Henrietta’s church, and there is Henrietta waiting all the time, and her veil is still to be put on, and her boots—where are her boots?

Helplessly her eyes wander round and round, and sure enough no boots are there. Kitchin has taken them away to be cleaned, concluding that they will not be wanted again that day. There are others in the boot-cupboard certainly, but none that suit, as she happens to be short of boots at the moment. Oh, that tiresome Kitchin, and that thrice tiresome, cruel woman who is still waiting down below, driving her more and more distracted every minute.

A groan of irrepressible bitterness escapes. She sinks into a chair ready to weep, all life, all energy taken out of her, numbness creeping over her veins.

“Well, I’m off,” cries a gay voice in the doorway, and in rustles Charlotte, revived, re-arranged, all sparkle

and dazzle. "How do you like me?" Now she is before the mirror, and surveying her brilliant self this way and that. "Not bad, am I?" concludes she, having no fault to find.

It is not till she has wheeled round for assent that her eye falls on the forlorn figure crouching in the background, and she stops short to demand half affectionately, half contemptuously: "Good gracious! you poor thing, what is the matter?"

"Your aunt Henrietta." Mrs. Sunning lifts a miserable eyelid, and the words come out with a sort of gasp.

"Aunt Henrietta? Now? Here?" Even Charlotte looks taken aback, and lays down her fan and gloves to consider. "Where is she? And why are you not with her?"

"I am come up to dress. She is waiting. And oh, Charlotte, I *don't* want to go, and she *will* take me——"

"Ha! ha! ha! Is that it? You stupid old mother, to let yourself in for this. I knew how it would be when you were so lively in your thanks last time. Henny-Penny took it all for gospel; she does not know you as I do. Come, wake up, my dear, you have got to go, and you had better look sharp or Henny won't have faith in you again. You would not like that, you know. How long have you kept her already? I can't go in to her like this," looking down at herself, "or else——"

"No, indeed, for I—I said you had a headache. I had to say it. That is, it slipped out; for she wanted you to go in to supper, and I was afraid she was going to say church also."

"Headache killed both birds with one stone. Thank you, dear. You did very well. But why on earth do you not get on? You will never be ready——"

"I can't go, Charlotte—that is, I suppose I *must*, but," rising and again beginning to hunt about in feeble,

aimless fashion, "I don't know where my things are, and Kitchin is out, and she has taken away my boots, the only pair I am wearing at present——"

"Go in your slippers. It is no distance."

"And this provoking 'toque' will not stick on."

"Here. Let me pin it. Where's your veil?"

"Oh, Charlotte, I don't know in the least. I never do know. And somehow I never dreamed of Henrietta's coming this evening——"

"You might have dreamed; there was no reason why she shouldn't."

"She was here last Sunday, and I thought——"

"There, now you are ready," for meantime Charlotte had been darting into this drawer and that, and with those deft, unerring fingers of hers that are as good as Kitchin's any day, has tied the veil, and pinched up the lace ruffle round the throat, and put into her mother's hands gloves and prayer-book, and, with a sly look, purse also—and now she stands by the open door, imperious, not to be disobeyed, yet withal not an altogether iron-hearted tyrant. "I am really rather sorry for you, mother," whispers she, and there is a little pat of encouragement on the drooping shoulder as it passes out, "but don't you be so free with your gratitude another time," and Charlotte laughs and nods; then leans over the banisters, "Do be quick, there's a dear, I am late as it is".

Mrs. Sunning pauses, and looks up irresolutely. Charlotte does not like being questioned, but still—"Shall you be late home?" she ventures. She has an odd sensation of its being somehow her duty to say something.

But Charlotte only laughs again, laughs and points downwards. She will not speak lest her voice should penetrate to Lady Henrietta's ears—so the dumb panto-

mime would indicate—but it may be questioned whether an answer, if one had been made, would have gone far towards allaying maternal anxiety. Charlotte would tell you that maternal anxiety is obsolete.

And now she is going to enjoy herself. It is a lovely evening for Ranelagh, and there is sure to be a full attendance. Jacky Newbolt and she will tool down in a hansom, and the drive will be pleasant; also the stroll in the gardens before dinner; for they are going early, on purpose to walk about and see and be seen.

Charlotte has told several of her friends to meet her there, and some who are engaged elsewhere have looked a trifle blank in consequence. Why does Miss Sunning go to Ranelagh? Hurlingham is ever so much nearer and better done. Miss Sunning does not think so—at least she only thinks so on the nights she goes to Hurlingham.

Is she going to Hurlingham next Sunday? No, she is going up the river next Sunday. This sort of thing is generally to be heard in Miss Sunning's vicinity. She is always going somewhere—unless she wishes to go somewhere else. It is curious how certain people find Charlotte disengaged, while others have been solemnly assured that she has not a free day; still more curious that the latter are just as ready as the former to catch her when they can.

Her very entertainer of to-night knows that she played him false unblushingly the week before, and that he would with equal readiness have been thrown over now had anything better turned up. He is quite philosophical. He admires Miss Sunning immensely, she is the best looking and best turned-out girl of his set; but as for taking her *au sérieux* as poor Gerry Brown does, such an idea never enters his head.

He is waiting in the porch when Charlotte and her

chaperon drive up, on the chance of their coming, nothing more; had they not appeared he would have eaten his dinner with the rest contentedly enough, and accepted subsequent excuses with perfect politeness and incredulity. This suits Charlotte.

Out of her hansom she steps smiling, as smiling as she has driven down. She is not going to waste another thought upon that recusant who spoilt her afternoon; indeed, she has positively and utterly forgotten his existence, and would like to tell him so. She did not want him, not she. He had only been thrown a bare permission to come and see her because it would have been odd to say nothing at 'Good-bye' time, considering they had been friends for three whole days, and she liked the man a little, and he said he lived near London, and was in it as often as not.

Well, she gave him his opportunity and he has not taken it. He can't expect anything more at her hands. The episode is over and done with; and Charlotte is not only in the best of spirits, but she outdoes herself at Ranelagh this summer evening. She is so witty and lucky that she cannot resist a low aside in her host's ear:—

"Did you ever know me in better form, Tarpy? Of course I am always the most delightful person *you* ever meet, but I am simply entrancing to-night, am I not?"

Tarpy is a sort of grandfather to her, Charlotte alleges. She may say anything to him. And now he swears she is within her rights in every word of the above. He drains his glass and sets it down, looking his fair guest in the face with the most cordial approbation; and, if not, perhaps, with quite as sentimental an air as might have been, what would you? He really likes Charlotte, and if she chooses to book him as an adorer, she is very welcome—only she must not expect him to languish.

To-night he has selected a table in the centre of the room, and Charlotte is the centre of the party gathered round it. Every eye is on her. She flashes anecdotes, jests, repartees on every side. There is a brisk effervescence in her talk which is quite removed from the clash of volubility that deafens the ear when some of Lord Tarporley's associates, not to be named here, are round the same table—it is really clever, really witty, and quite proper according to Tarpy's notions of propriety. He would tell you that even his mother might listen and would understand—in moderation—what Miss Sunning talks about.

And, of course, most of those present do, and are quick to appreciate piquant descriptions and happy allusions, enlightening in murmured asides the less nimble of brain; so that some of the latter, belonging we may be sure to Charlotte's own sex, wonder enviously how such things come into her head.

Of course they have to laugh. And they like to think they are at an amusing party, and that people from other tables are casting furtive glances in their direction, even smiling surreptitiously if near enough to catch the jest which provokes their applause.

By-and-bye they will repeat the jest. "Did you hear that good thing Charlotte Sunning said the other night?"

If some one who was not there puts a question: "Oh, Charlotte was in great form and looking splendid. A wonderful new frock, the sort of frock that made every other girl wish she had put on something else."

"Was it a smart party?"

"Of course: Charlotte was there."

"Tarpy in a good mind?"

"Charlotte always puts Tarpy in a good mind."

As this is an understood thing, and as no one expects

anything else than that the dinner is Charlotte's dinner, her royal airs are unresented even at the time, and merrily the hour passes.

Anon my lady rises from her seat. Others rise too—but no matter. She alone gains a new brilliance from the change.

Drawn up to her full height beneath the glittering chandelier, Heavens! what a lovely creature have we here displayed! "I look my best standing," Charlotte has been known to say.

Slowly she turns her head and surveys the scene, while gradually the scene on every side surveys her.

"Who is she?" It is a stranger, an outsider, who, open-mouthed and staring, ejaculates breathlessly the impetuous demand.

"What! Don't you know Charlotte?" It is met by a laugh.

The stranger mutters something about Charlotte.
The laugh is repeated.

CHAPTER II.

"WHAT COULD I DO IN TOWN THAT WOULD BE HALF SO JOLLY AS LYING HERE?"

WHO and where was the man who had proved himself unworthy of the honour designed him by his queen of queens?

Drax Rotherham was quietly smoking in his own garden.

He had meant to go to Town, but the day was hot, Norwood station was a mile off, and the road to it lay baking in the sun; Sunday trains were few and far between—slow stoppers, all of them; besides, he elected to put off his call in Charles Street to a more convenient season.

"You are not going to-day, then?" It was his sister Adeline, who had strolled down the lawn after her brother, and who now stood looking down at him where he stretched his idle length upon the turf, with a shade of disappointment on her face. "I thought—you said—you were going;" she hesitated, and twisted a flower between her fingers.

Adeline was a shy girl, and nothing is more formidable to a nature like hers than to open a subject which has been thought about but not spoken about.

Such a subject she had in her mind, and the above was to prove the key to it. The first turn of the key was nothing; it was the consciousness of what further effort might unlock, and of the momentous issues which hung on that unlocking, which embarrassed her.

"Hullo! little one," said Drax, raising himself on his elbow, "so you have found out this cosy corner too? Jolly here, isn't it?" taking his pipe from his mouth, and looking round with a contented eye. "I used to dream of this bit of brook and the rustle of the leaves overhead when I was away in those infernal regions where water and grass, at least such water and grass, are things unknown"—and he re-instated the pipe and dropped down again, smoking luxuriously.

"So you have given up the idea of—of making that call you spoke of?"

He nodded.

"Isn't it rather a pity? I mean, you said this morning you were going: is there any real reason why you shouldn't?"

"Any real reason, eh?" He breathed a cloud, and turned to her with a smile. "Any real reason? Let's see. That depends on what a 'real' reason is. Would you say it was 'real' enough that I liked better to stay at home?"

"Then why did you say you were going?"

"Why, indeed? I suppose I meant to go, though it seems now that I must have been a fool to mean anything of the kind. What could I do in Town that would be half as jolly as lying here? To say nothing of the awful nuisance of dressing. Sunday is the only whole day in the week I get away from the paving-stones, remember. The only day I get your society too," laughing. "You don't want to drive me away?"

"Oh, Drax!"

He met a pair of wistful eyes whose troubled expression half surprised, half amused him. What in the world could this gentle, pertinacious slip of a thing be at? He took hold of her muslin frock, and pulled her down by his side.

"Let's have it out," he said, "there is something working in this little noddle which needs an escape valve. What is it, my wise woman of the family? Tell your revered elder brother what makes his presence in this particular quarter of the domain obnoxious to your small self! For what reason is his room more desired than his company? Is there some one else—'is there a nearer one yet and a dearer one?'—ha! Is that it, you little——?"

"No, no, no, Drax! Oh, Drax! how can you?" blushing as if a dire accusation had been made. "As if I should ever have thought of such a thing! Even if there ever had been any one, which there isn't," vehemently, "how could you suppose I should want to send *you* out of the way?"

She was brushing the turf with her hand as she stammered and panted forth the words; he took the little hand in his and shook it. He was thirteen years older than she.

And the tremulous emphasis on that 'you' betokened all that Drax Rotherham was to his young half-sister. She worshipped him with the passionate adoration of a tender, shrinking heart, whose deepest emotions are jealously hidden from prying eyes.

The feeling had been fostered and accentuated by the circumstances of her lot. Adeline's mother was dead, and her father, a querulous invalid, took but little real interest in his children. His failing health had indeed instigated, possibly compelled him to send for the son without whose aid he could scarcely have kept a roof over the heads of the helpless little flock; but if he could have disposed of them, and left Drax free to pursue his career in the East undisturbed, it would have suited him very well to do so, even though such an arrangement meant prolonged and hopeless separation.

As things were, however, friends and relatives decided that the young man, who had attained a fair position in a mercantile house in Calcutta, should be induced to apply for a transfer to the home department, and this exchange had been effected, and Drax settled at his new work about a year previous to the date at which our story opens.

He was now thirty-three years of age, lean and brown from the Indian sun, and with a plentiful sprinkling of grey hairs among the black which, however, were still thick upon his head.

To his young brothers and sisters he appeared old. Old, but grand. Adeline and the smaller girls gazed reverently at his boots and sticks, and when occasion offered had field days among the articles on his toilet-table. Their father had no such things; had never had them; would not have known what to do with them if they had been thrust upon him.

But it was not only that splendour was obviously natural to Drax, it was that he himself seemed an integral part of it. He made no account of finery as finery. He wore, and used, and threw away his accoutrements when done with, without bestowing on them a thought, without, indeed, being aware that they were in the slightest degree different from the belongings of any one else in the house.

He had always had what he wanted; there had never been any cause for his not having it; since not merely had his salary been good, but he had inherited from his mother a sum of money which, it is true, had been cheerfully handed over to those at home as soon as it was made plain they stood in need of it, but which up to that time had been useful as an extra.

Luckily, an increase of pay came just as this private fountain-head ran dry, and Drax continued to keep a

comfortable establishment, drive a good horse, and trouble his head as little about ways and means as he had ever done.

This easy life, albeit a life of exile, was not without its charm, and it must be owned that the early days of reunion between the absentee and his 'people,' the people who despite a fairly sustained epistolary intercourse were still, after a fashion, strangers, were scarcely happy ones.

There was a good deal to surprise and a little to shock a free-handed, independent bachelor in the narrow and limited existence led by the inmates of the suburban villa.

Aspen Edge was a good villa enough as villas go; indeed it was superior to many of its neighbours from the fact of its standing in its own grounds, even if those grounds only extended to a couple of acres—but it was not the kind of place Drax had imagined it.

He had pictured a cottage surrounded by grassy meadows wherein a flowing stream meandered—for much had been made of the stream in early descriptions of the new home, when Mr. Rotherham, having to give up his country living on account of failing health, had accepted in lieu thereof a curacy which would enable them to live in a locality recommended by his doctors—and as the change suited both himself and his family, all was *couleur-de-rose* in the accounts despatched to Calcutta.

Drax loved the little old parsonage on the windy hill where he was born, and round which gathered the associations of a free and happy boyhood. To him it had never seemed isolated and dreary. The miry lanes which hemmed it in as soon as the mists of autumn settled down over the valley beneath were nothing to the healthy lad with his stout, hobnailed boots. The

moan of the wind through the creaking branches of the trees, which in a gale would sweep the very windows of the house; the rattle of those windows themselves in their ill-fitting casements, had no power to depress his spirits. His own little draughty den wherein he hammered and glued and held high revel with his companions—boys from the village, honest, eager, simple-minded as himself—was a kingdom of delight.

Nor did his father's second marriage, when his son was twelve years old, serve in any way to shake the little fellow's conviction that no one had a better home than he. His mother had died before he had time to know much about her; and though an aunt had taken her place and been perfectly kind and affectionate in a commonplace way towards her brother's son, it was an improvement to have a bright-faced young stepmother and a set of 'jolly little kids' to greet him on his return from school at Christmas and Midsummer.

By-and-bye his bedroom was required for the nursery overflow, and he surrendered it willingly. He did not care where he went, and stumped up to an attic at night as cheerfully as ever he had retired to the superior chamber below.

The kiddies were such fun to play with. Sometimes he had to 'row' them certainly, as when they got into his den and knocked over his glue-pot, but they were so small and helpless and easily crushed that he had them at his heels again, forgiven and adoring, almost before it was convenient.

Mrs. Rotherham, number two, was never tired of singing her step-son's praises. He was the dearest boy, and so *sweet* with the children. She always knew where to look for Drax if he were missed from the downstairs rooms; he was sure to have found his way to the nursery.

"Oh, I say, I'm blowed if that's true," muttered Drax to himself, overhearing this; "I only went because they had hot jam and bullied me to come for it."

If nothing had been said, he would not have been ashamed of going, for he had a curious absence of self-consciousness which prompted him to go his own way without supposing it worth any one's notice—but he did not like to hear himself called 'sweet'.

In half an hour, however, the offence was forgotten, and the great, lanky boy, extended full length on the floor, was turned into a Gulliver, with Liliputians mounting him and crawling over him on all sides.

It was a terrible blow to the Liliputians when their Gulliver took farewell of them all one wild spring morning, and sailed away and away, to see them no more, as it seemed then, forever.

To be sure little Adeline, oldest of the group, was only seven, (but are there not some among us who can yet recall what agonies tore our sobbing bosoms beneath the pinafores at that tender age?) Adeline's large red eyes, which told a tale no power on earth would have forced from her lips, were commented upon in rough but kindly fashion by the country-bred servants at the parsonage. They essayed to comfort the little girl with hopes and prognostications. "Master Drax would come back a grand gentleman, so rich and freehanded, with beautiful presents for every one, and may-be a wife——"

"A wife!" the poor little thing literally screamed with passion. A wife! She never forgot the idea.

When Drax came home at the end of five years, and Addy installed herself chief pet and satellite, she whispered the tale one day in his ear. She was less shy with him at that time than she afterwards became.

And how they laughed together over the notion, the handsome young fellow not a little pleased with himself

in that he was fancy free and superior to all such nonsense!

Pressed on the subject, he had indeed to own that he had not, so far, come across many beautiful and desirable women; he was not in the way of meeting many women, not *many* women of any kind.

And those he did know were usually married and—and not his sort. To Addy he was discreet and said no more. It was not for her to know that he had fallen in here and there with fair ones who would not have been averse to throwing a net in his direction during the absence of their lawful lords.

Once or twice such a thing had happened, and Drax had had a hint of it from others. He would never have found it out for himself. But he had remained stolid, and the net, spread in vain, floated elsewhere. He only remembered its existence beneath his young sister's childish anxiety and her deep-breathed relief on receiving his positive assurance.

And he went back to the East carrying with him the remembrance of a joyous summer holiday, and still as well content as ever with the old grey house, naturally at its best 'knee-deep in June,' with garden full of cherries and strawberries, and verdure making beautiful the surrounding landscape.

It was the same scene which met his eyes when he paid his second visit to his native land. Again the sun shone, and the flowers bloomed, and although there was a second tombstone in the parsonage corner of the little churchyard, and Drax missed and sincerely mourned the second mother who had quietly sunk into her grave during this later term of absence, he still found much to enjoy in revisiting the old home, and renewing old ties and associations.

The children were growing up: Adeline was seven-

teen; Evie, only two years younger, was the taller of the two; the boys, romping, moon-faced youngsters, were tearing their way through lessons and pastimes, and all three uproariously delighted to welcome their big brother and tread at his heels as of yore.

When Drax went out again after this visit he minded the separation more than he did after the first. He had started interests in common with the boys; he had made friends with their friends, was elected a member of one community and offered a partnership in another concern. It made him feel oddly down-spirited when he had to throw cold water on a scheme by announcing: "I shan't be here then," and hear the groan which followed.

In regard to Addy and Evie, he almost went the length of wishing his father would marry again for their sakes.

"Father lives too much in his books and too little among you all," said he. "It might be a good thing for you girls to have——"

"Not a step-mother, Drax?"

A humorous look. The speaker saw what she had said.

"How strange! Somehow I never thought of that. But did you not feel as we should do? Did you not mind when our father brought mother home?"

"You see I was so small, Addy, and she was very good to me."

"Yes, yes!" Her eyes glistened. Then a little smile broke out.

"Father was lucky in two, but we could not expect a third to be as nice. And anyway," anticipating argument, "anyway, it's different when you are as old as I am, and Evie is close behind me. Even the boys wouldn't take kindly to any one's scolding them but old Jane. And

Jane knows about Hal's chest, and *makes* him tell her directly it begins to be sore, and coaxes him not to mind blisters and things; and though she scolds the boys herself, she never tells tales of them, and really sympathises in her heart with their messes and misfortunes. I know she bought things with her own money to replace Huby's breakages, and none of us dared take any notice. It would simply kill Jane if any one were to be put over her head now."

"All right. I see it wouldn't do."

"Don't worry about us, Drax."

Drax, however, had worried, not persistently, but by fits and starts as occasion offered. The home letters after he again left to go his solitary way were not so cheerful as they had been. He perceived that something was wrong; and at length, after a period of two years had passed, the facts of the case were announced. Mr. Rotherham's health had broken down—not completely, but sufficiently to make a longer tenure of his present incumbency impossible, and a plan was on foot whereby he should be relieved of the care of a parish while yet discharging certain clerical duties.

The last news was that this fresh sphere of action was to be in West Norwood, a favourite suburb of the metropolis, and particularly noted for its salubrious conditions. The stipend of a curate would be small; indeed Mr. Rotherham felt that it behoved him to appeal to his eldest son, greatly as he disliked doing so, to assist in the family maintenance—but otherwise the change was desirable as well as imperative.

A letter from the son crossed that of the father. In it Drax placed at the latter's disposal the income derived from the five thousand pounds bequeathed him by his mother, together with an assurance that he was well able to spare it, and a desire affectionately ex-

her; for, as I say, I never thought of seeing her again, nor any of them—not being in their set, nor in any set where we should be likely to meet casually—so I was just saying ‘Good-bye’ all round, when she,” animation lighting up his countenance at the recollection, “she, the smartest woman there, said out before them all, that I must look her up—that I was not to go and lose her address—that Sunday was her day—and a lot more besides, all showing that she meant it.”

“And now you are not going!”

The mortified ejaculation was Addy’s, on reaching this point for the second time, and yet perceiving no movement on the part of the outstretched figure on the grass.

“Oh, that’s another thing,” said Drax, coolly.

The facts of the case were this. Charlotte had bestowed upon Mr. Drax Rotherham a vast deal more of her attention than he recognised, and it had been no small amusement to the rest of the party to see smiles and glances thrown away which might have proved winged darts in the case of another.

The brown, healthy man who ate and drank and looked about him ready to enjoy and admire whatever turned up, frankly making the most of his holiday, yet so modest and unobtrusive withal, baffled Charlotte.

He did not want to flirt—he wanted to see the racing, and the people, and the shows along the banks. He appreciated everything, and Miss Sunning appreciated his doing so.

The first day she announced that she liked him, the next it was obvious that she was trying to make him like her, on the last it was doubtful, both to herself and others, how far she had succeeded.

For people were either at Charlotte’s feet, or turned their backs upon her—and Rotherham was as little likely

to do the one as the other. Somehow the lady had missed fire.

She told Lord Tarporley so, realising the force of the well-worn saying anent truth spoken in jest. "Tarpy, that man doesn't adore me. What shall I do to make him adore me? I have toiled and striven, and he just looks back at me with his pleased smile, as if to say 'It's all right, you're very nice,' till I could pitch him overboard head foremost. Why did you have such a stick for me to waste myself upon?"

"The waste is sublime," said he.

Charlotte turned away pettishly.

Then she made a final effort. With her most enchanting air she bade the recreant to her house, and her spirits revived as she saw the quick surprise and pleasure on his brow.

He thanked her, and promised to go without hesitation. His tone carried sincerity. She would bide her time; he should succumb at last.

"I am always at home on Sundays. Come to-morrow, Mr. Rotherham."

This was on Saturday evening, and it was on the afternoon of the next day that we find the man who should have been one of the frock-coated figures in Mrs. Sunning's drawing-room, reposing in his usual place, beneath the shade of his own elms.

CHAPTER III.

TWO IN A BALCONY.

"DO you expect a full house to-day, Charlotte?" enquired Mrs. Sunning of her daughter the following Sunday.

The ladies had risen from the luncheon-table, and Charlotte stood by the window looking out over the heads of the somewhat dusty flower-bank without.

In response to her mother's question, she yawned and turned her head.

"I am thinking—I have half a mind to go out."

"To go out? But you tell people this is your day."

"John can say I had to go—or anything he pleases. I don't feel inclined for people; I shall go and sit in the Park," she concluded decisively.

"You could be in by five."

"I could, but I shan't. At least, I don't know. If I come, I come. You go out too, mother."

"I could go to Lady Mitcham's," Mrs. Sunning pondered reflectively. "She asked me, and she has some things she wants to show me. Then shall I say we are both out?" And she moved towards the bell-rope.

"No, stop; let that poor creature have his dinner in peace. I daresay he has hardly begun it yet, for they are always late in the kitchen. I'll give him his orders before I go out." And Charlotte passed her arm inside her mother's, propelling her lazily upstairs.

"You might as well look in on Henny-Penny when you are about it," she said presently. "It will stave her off, and fill up your time. If we don't go out soon we shall be caught, but you can't spend your whole afternoon at the Mitchams'. Go to Henny first, and sit there till it's time to move on."

By three o'clock the house was empty—but by four Charlotte was back in it, and the footman had had his orders. No one was at home unless he was told by his young lady herself to the contrary. Charlotte had an intuition.

She had not had an intuition on the previous Sunday, indeed she had experienced a curious feeling all along that Drax Rotherham was going to disappoint her, and *that* just because Lord Tarporley and the rest were present and were pleased with her disappointment—but she thought she saw a way to turn the tables now. She smiled to herself.

And though she did not put on the ultra-smart frock which was her very newest and best, and in which she had looked so bewitching to the eyes of poor Gerry Brown the week before, it might be a question whether the simple white muslin which took its place and which had been on since the morning was not fully as effective from the becoming point of view.

"It is vilely dirty, but it suits me," considered she, surveying herself before the glass.

She had a colour, but not too high a colour; she looked fresh, not flushed; her hair was 'anyhow,' but it was the 'anyhow' of soft, rich, glossy abundance, and after a moment's hesitation she let it alone. She was still young enough to afford disorder.

Besides she had to be quick. Unless she were down and at her post of observation—a peep-hole in the balcony—before calling time, she might chance to miss

pressed that he should be at once applied to should any further pecuniary trouble arise. The Christmas cheque which followed, made out to Adeline for the benefit of herself and the younger ones, was also larger than usual.

"And I daresay you and Evie will find you can do a lot of things at Norwood you could not at Hilltop," wrote Drax, though in his heart he breathed a sigh for Hilltop, for the windy gorge and the wooded vale; but as sighings were not in his line, and as the thing was done, and had had to be done, sighing or no, he summoned philosophy to his aid, and demanded to know all about the new home and the new life.

The first outburst was entirely satisfactory. Hilltop, it now appeared, had been a desolate spot to vegetate in, year in year out. "You have no idea how long the winters used to seem," wrote Adeline, her pen racing over the page as if let loose like all the rest by the grand upheaval. "Hilltop was our home, and I should not have said a word against it, if we had had to go on living there; but it got worse and worse, indeed it did—it was dreadful outside, for there had not been new gravel in front for ages, and father had no money to put things in order when they went wrong anywhere. The wet came through the ceilings and left great stains. And the wall-papers peeled off—Evie and I used to paste them up, but they never looked right—and half the handles were off the doors, and worse than all, Drax, the snow lay on the roof last winter, and when the thaw set in, it literally poured down upon the stairs, and we had to set buckets to catch it. In the summer we used to forget all this—and you only saw it in the summer since it became so shabby and leaky—besides I don't believe boys notice. Ours at least don't, they ask now: 'What was the matter with it?' if we girls

say anything—so I hope you will not think I am complaining; it is only to show you the contrast everything is here.”

A long account of the bright, snug, suburban villa, with all its conveniences and appliances, followed.

Drax smiled to himself as he read. It did not seem to him so very wonderful that a house should be equipped with a bathroom—(A bathroom!), nor that there should be gas to the topmost bedrooms. (“If I had been there, I would have bargained for electric light,” thought he.)

But though these and other housewifely items did not rouse the enthusiasm anticipated, on one page of his sister’s sheet the reader fastened eagerly. Adeline wrote that there was a garden, and trees, and a running brook. “If we had been obliged to live near the station,” she explained, “we could not have had a garden, not a real garden at least. The agents say there is a run on houses near the station for the City men. So was it not lucky for us that we really wanted to be *away* from it, quite away? So now we are close to the church, and down a little side road, and our beautiful garden is bounded by a brook.”

When Drax came to this: “That’s all right,” said he, heartily.

For some time after the family removal the letters continued in the same strain.

It had taken place in the autumn, when obviously the shadow of the forthcoming winter months had lain like a cloud over Hilltop, so that the dispersing of the cloud in itself brought sunshine.

Improved accounts of Mr. Rotherham’s health were also despatched to the East. Drax pictured his pretty sisters making quite a sensation in the new neighbourhood. He was glad to hear the boys had skating, and

that London pantomimes made amends to them for runs with the beagles at Christmas.

Of course they would have preferred the country, what country-born lads would not?—but they were now of an age to be at school for the greater part of the year, and holidays would be holidays wherever they were spent. “You stupid little beggars,” he wrote in reply to a big, sprawling complaint of the beastly new house, where there was no stable for the rabbits, “why don’t you rig up a rabbit-house in the garden?”

Adeline caught Huby writing his reply, and was just in time to prevent the beneficent elder brother’s being candidly and hopefully informed why.

“You are not going to ask *him* for the money, you naughty, greedy boy?” Her cheek burned with shame. “I’d rather give it you myself.”

And she did, out of her slender store, and the poor little fellow, who meant no harm, was confused beneath her scorn, and terribly disappointed withal—for he had seen his rabbit-house within measurable distance, and why should Addy interfere, when Drax would have given it to him in a moment? The guileless Huby, we must confess, took the good the gods provided, and did not then nor thereafter concern himself as to what it all meant.

Drax had been a little over a year at home when he appeared one evening with a letter in his hand.

“Look here, you two, this is for you to decide. I had meant to take you to Henley for one of the regatta days, in fact I can still do so if you agree to go upon the first—but I have an invitation to a house-boat for the remaining two days——”

“No, you haven’t, you have one for all three,” said Addy, quickly.

He halted, hesitated, laughed.

"Let me see the letter. There! I knew it," as she whipped it out of his hand, "and you would have given it up for our sakes!"

"Nonsense! Given it up? I am quite out of the way of house-parties, and should not know how to get through three days of one, but I thought I might as well go for part of the time——"

"Why, it's from a lord, Drax!"

Drax looked at the speaker, unclosed his lips and shut them again. How should poor Evie know not to talk of 'a lord'? He would not put her to the blush.

"Lord Tarporeley met me in Calcutta, and we had a few days' shooting together in the hills afterwards. I ran across him last week, and he said something about inviting me to their house-boat—his sister-in-law runs the show, he said, and they have got together a pleasant party, and thought they would have room for one more man—but I did not expect it would come to anything, so I said nothing to you."

"Oh, do! Do go!"

"And you shall go for the three days," said Adeline, firmly. "Drax, I want to say something. Evie and I have been talking this over, because we thought perhaps you meant to take us, as you did last year. You were so very kind, and we tried to enjoy ourselves, but—you remember what a very hot day it was? and how dreadful the trains were? and when we got to Henley how long it was before we could get a boat? and then we had just to row up and down, not knowing a single person there among all the crowds—and we saw people going everywhere to tea, and we had nowhere. Oh, Drax, I don't mean to be ungrateful; you did everything you could for us and I would not have said a word, only that now *you* can go and enjoy it—and we should *not* enjoy it. Evie knows we did not before, and should

not now—do forgive us for telling you this, and let us think of you as quite happy among all the gay people,” adjured she with an earnestness that was almost pathetic; “and on a house-boat, too!” she wound up, a sigh of envy bursting irrepressibly from her bosom.

Drax laughed. Certainly three whole days in the open air—not quite whole days, those he could not afford, but if he ran up to Town in the morning, as Lord Tarporley, who it now came out had been quite pressing, himself suggested, he could be back by lunch time—three days of merry-making among people of his own class, people with whom he could be himself as he was in Calcutta days, not as the visitors at Aspen Edge found him—it was really rather jolly to think of it. “And I won’t forget if I can do anything for you two,” he said, as he drove off.

“I wonder, I do wonder if he will?” sighed they.

When he came back they hung about him for hours. He had heaps to tell and told it ungrudgingly, so that soon the girl in white, the girl in blue, and the girl with the cricket ribbon round her hat were all familiar and distinct personages to their imagination.

About Miss Charlotte Sunning they were extremely inquisitive.

Drax described her fearlessly, but glowingly. She was a radiant beauty—as sparkling with wit as with diamonds. He had seen no one like her since he came from the East; indeed, he fancied she would have held her own even among the Viceregal ladies, whose lustre, he declared, had blinded him at the time, and still prevented his seeing others clearly.

Miss Sunning was quite *the* person of the party. She was asked what she would like and what she would do on all occasions. Little Lord Tarporley—no, Drax did

not think he was in love with her, but he was very proud of having her as his guest, and they seemed old friends.

The sister-in-law was a dull kind of woman. He did not think she and Charlotte hit it off. Yes, 'Charlotte'. Every one called Miss Sunning 'Charlotte' behind her back.

He supposed they were what would be called smart people. They were really a jolly set, and he had never enjoyed three days more. By the way, Miss Sunning had asked him to call, and he had written down her address in his note-book. He read it aloud.

"In Mayfair," said Adeline, in a low, awed voice. "Oh, think, Drax, if it should be—I mean if she did—do you think she liked you enough to——"

"To ask me to call? It looks like it. I was rather surprised, I can tell you, for I never ran after her as the others did, and though we were pretty often thrown together accidentally" (Accidentally? And he believed it!) "and had one long evening alone on the deck when the others went off in small boats, I didn't suppose she would mean to know me afterwards."

"Didn't you? Are people like that?"

"Oh, yes," said he, easily. "If they go about the world much, they can't be expected to keep up with chance acquaintances. I was rather surprised at Tarpy's knowing me, and I had seen a lot more of him than of Miss Sunning."

"Do you call him 'Tarpy'?"

Drax coloured slightly.

"It slipped out. We called him that on the *Firefly*—at least the others did, for I didn't—to his face. But I thought of him as 'Tarpy' for the time being."

"Well, but about Miss Sunning?" said Adeline, after a pause.

"Aye! Miss Sunning; it was really very good of

the very object she had in view. She threw her outdoor things upon the bed and hastened below.

Hardly had she got there before he came. "What luck!" whispered Charlotte to herself.

She could scarcely believe her luck, glancing at the clock as she ran by to catch John. Why, it was only a few minutes after four, and she could now say positively she was not at home to any one—not to any one—while Drax would never know, sitting placidly in the drawing-room with her—or if, stop, there might be cards on the hall table as he passed out, she would prepare for that by telling him with a laugh that he had been let in by the footman's mistake.

She would look innocently in his face, and suggest: "I daresay you asked for *me*? My mother is out, so she left orders that no one should be admitted; but of course if you asked for *me*——" And as honest Drax knew no one else to ask for, he would naturally own he did, and inwardly thank his stars he did. Afterwards they would have a pleasant tea together.

A little movement of surprise did very well to begin the scene.

"Oh, Mr. Rotherham!" (Charlotte discovered deep in an arm-chair, reading.) "Oh, I—yes, of course, I told you to come, but—oh, it doesn't matter——"

By this time he is uneasily conscious of something wrong, as his look and a murmured apology betray.

"It does not signify at all;" Charlotte recovers herself and is anxious to efface the impression given at first. Oh, dear, yes; this is her day, and it is all right; won't he come out into the balcony? It is only that her mother had to go out, and she was not expecting visitors, the season being so nearly over. "You ought to have come last Sunday"—suddenly an arch smile breaks out over the speaker's face; and the ceremony is over.

"It was too soon," said Drax, seating himself in a low chair by her side. Had he been living in the Palace of Truth he would have said, "It was too hot"—but then which of us does live in that inconvenient abode?

Besides, he had actually debated the 'Too soon' question with himself as an adjunct.

"I mean," he continued, perceiving the phrase might cut both ways, "although you were so good to ask me, I hardly ventured to——"

"That was very nice of you. But I meant it. I assure you I did. I thought you would like to meet the rest of the Henley people, and they were all here, every one of them. I looked for *you*"—a dangerous glance.

"If I could have supposed that, Miss Sunning ('she really is a charming creature,' thought Drax to himself), "you can't imagine I would not sooner have been here than anywhere else," continued he, aloud; not at all concerned about facts, but deciding that this might be a suitable response.

Apparently it was, for "That depends," said Charlotte, still good-humouredly suggestive. "Depends on where that 'anywhere' might have been, you know."

"I did not come to Town," said he.

"Country pleasant?" rejoined she.

"Very. But where I live can't be called 'country'."

"I know. But it has its attractions. You have heaps of friends round you, I daresay?"

"One has to make one's own friends in every place. You know I have spent most of my life—since I was a boy—in India, and I had to leave behind the people I was intimate with there."

"Whatever made you come back?" said Charlotte, settling herself for conversation, "wasn't it good enough? I should have thought men have rather a good time in India. Women have."

Little by little she drew him out. She knew he could talk; had made him talk to her on the deck of the *Firefly*, and found herself thinking about it afterwards.

He had been quite interesting. His tame little experiences, so mild and unexciting that she would have rejected them with contempt had they come to her in any other way, fell pleasantly on her ear, being for that ear alone.

She told him he should put them in a book, and he had the sense to smile at the idea. Of course she did not mean it, and he knew she did not, and did not even disclaim. He was a nice man.

And he spoke to her nicely, taking for granted her intelligence and certain other qualities she was conscious of possessing, but for which the demand in her market was low.

Imagination, for instance. Who ever thought of appealing to Charlotte Sunning's imagination? It was true that her cousin Kitty and she in the days of their teens spouted Tennyson and Browning to each other, and Kitty still remembers the fire in Charlotte's eye and the tragedy of her step; also her wondrous memory, which gave poor Kitty little chance of getting in her voice—but Charlotte never reads poetry now. She was surprised at herself and vastly pleased withal when something Drax Rotherham said brought an apt quotation to her lips which she was begged to repeat a second time.

"I used to know the whole," said she; "I used to go off along the shore on a moonlight night—we lived by the sea when my father was alive—and look up at the sky, and over the waves, and say it out loud."

Afterwards, seeing the impression this made, other reminiscences followed. The two talked quite simply and seriously.

But when the rest of the party came back, Charlotte, feeling as if she had been in another world, leaped back into her own, careful that none should suspect she had ever left it, yet with a reservation in her own mind.

She would keep Drax Rotherham for times when she felt inclined to be good. She would not let him go and waste himself on a girl of his own sort. "He shall leaven me," she elected. "That shall be his mission. After an extra dose of Tarpy and Co., I shall send for Drax to cool me down; and if in return I warm him up, we shall be quits."

Drax, as we know, did not at first appear disposed to fall in with this exchange of duties; indeed he failed so utterly to grasp the situation, that his friendly indifference did more for him in the lady's estimation than any other attitude he could have adopted.

Now she must have him at all costs; now she must put forth all she knew; best of all, she must be wary, wily and careful, oh, so careful.

There was novelty in the whole thing, and novelty was the very breath of life to Charlotte.

"I should not wonder if he has some one else," thought she, and hoped he had. If only he had some one else, it would be the one thing needful to complete her triumph, when the day was won.

So far, nothing on that head was known; and she was sufficiently learned in human nature, especially in man's nature, to tell herself that it might not be easily known, and would be best for the present let alone. She must not frighten her bird who was still in the bush, and towards whom her hand was stealing by devious paths.

Accordingly, since that careless little touch respecting the 'heaps of friends' whose counter-attractions had presumably been stronger than her own only produced

a rejoinder of the kind which might mean anything or nothing, she glided off the ice which might be thin, and taking a wide circle on safer ground, returned to it at the end of half an hour.

"Now tell me about your present life, Mr. Rotherham. We needn't go inside for tea. Bring it here, John. You are not going back to India?" continued Charlotte, playing the hostess with an easy, sociable air. "You are living on with your people at Norwood. And that's all I know about you—though mother would know more if she were in, for I am sure I have heard her talk of the Rotherhams. Haven't you an aunt, Lady Jane?"

He had not, and had never heard of such a person. N.B.—Neither had Charlotte, but that was not to say no Lady Jane existed, and accordingly:—

"Perhaps she is not one of your Rotherhams?" said she. "In the north, I believe it was, that mother met her. Where do your people come from?"

"My father had a living in Sussex, but I am not sure," he paused; he really was not sure, it seemed odd to say it, and yet it was the case, he was not sure of anything beyond this fact.

"I believe we have relations near Oxford," he be-thought himself at last. His face, as he gravely searched his memory for something to lay hold upon, and the very small something which finally came out, was too much for her gravity. Her eyelids fell to hide the mirth within. "He dropped from the clouds," she said to herself.

Aloud: "Isn't it delicious to be so untrammelled? Pity me, who have uncles, and aunts, and cousins at every street corner. There's one close by whose Argus eye watches whatever I do and wherever I go. She doesn't love me either. 'Either' or 'neither,' which ought I to say? I was so tremendously educated that

my poor little head is packed as tight as a drum, and the grammar is down at the bottom and can't always be got at. Where were your scholastic duties carried on, Mr. Rotherham?"

"At a little place in Berkshire," said he, blushing.

"Dear me, how wonderful! You are what you are from only a little place in Berkshire! You must be a genius!"

"I—I did rather well at it."

"Rather well? I echo 'rather'!" and she laughed.

"It was a great deal luck," said Drax, honestly. "It happened that a fellow was wanted, and the head partner was an old friend of my father's."

"You must have been almost a boy."

"I was nineteen."

By this time Charlotte was mentally summing up: "No birth. No money. No family connections. No knowledge of the world."

She shot a side glance at her companion. We have never said that Drax was handsome, but if he had not been he would never have been sitting in Mrs. Sunning's balcony. He had an almost perfect face. Looked at sideways, the profile was cut as clear as a cameo, and the dark, brown skin was smooth as satin.

"Jolly good-looking fellow," Lord Tarporley described Rotherham to his other friends, when announcing to whom the vacant bed in his house-boat was assigned—and each severally and silently endorsed the opinion when Drax appeared.

What a dashed good figure the fellow had besides! They eyed the fellow with cold envy and admiration, while little Tarporley strutted unconcernedly about, overjoyed at his sensation and their sulky looks.

"Splendid, isn't he?" said Tarpy, cocking his head on one side. "Won't Charlotte pick him up quick?"

Even before the episode was over, and before Charlotte failed in the picking, there 'had been, however, a cessation of the sulky looks, and 'The Colonial,' as Rotherham was secretly dubbed, was admitted to the favour of the crew.

'The Colonial' was Tarporley's idea, and proved a happy one. In a manner it placed Drax on another footing, outside the pale of rivalry. He was a stranger, almost a foreigner; a guest to be petted, entertained, instructed, and permitted to make love to Charlotte. He was a thing of the hour, ephemeral, innocuous.

What though he were not returning to the remote beyond from whence he sprung: he was, by his own confession, as far removed from the Forbidden City within the great metropolis, of which they were denizens, as though oceans rolled between. Let him have his little day, even as a dog hath it.

At the end of twenty-four hours there was not a soul on board the *Firefly* who was not on the best of terms with Rotherham; and, as we have said, he might even have flirted with Charlotte Sunning and been forgiven—but when it became apparent that the long, brown, friendly man, who took so much interest in the sport and so little in the by-play, gave no more heed to the lady than if she had been his grandmother, both the men and the women of the party chuckled.

"Look here," said Tarporley, on breaking up, "who'll back Charlotte? I'll take odds on The Colonial. He is a jolly sight cleverer than you think him, and he doesn't mean to be hooked by any woman."

No one backed Charlotte.

And when nothing was seen of Drax in the Mayfair drawing-room next day, and Charlotte at Ranelagh was gay and daring and altogether glorious afterwards, Lord Tarporley extolled his own prophetic eye. He had said

Charlotte would be baffled, and she was. She was hiding her defeat.

He did not call in Charles Street every Sunday, but he thought he would do so on the following one.

"No one at home? Oh," said he, on being checked at the door by the anxious John, who never blundered over the commands of his young mistress. "Oh," repeated Lord Tarporley, thoughtfully.

As he spoke, his eye fell on the hall table, but no hat was there. John had removed it.

The simple, serviceable creature now stood all attention, with the door thrown back, and an expression of "Any message, my lord?" written on his face. Not a sound was heard from within or above. Charlotte and her guest, screened from observation by flowering shrubs along the front of the balcony, as well as by the closely drawn awning on either side, were conversing in tones too low to penetrate beyond, and in another moment the invader would have turned away, disappointed but deceived.

It was not to be.

As luck would have it, something said amused Charlotte, and her laugh, her well-known, charming, irresistible laugh, rippled over the edge of the balustrade, and fell distinctly on Lord Tarporley's ear. He started and looked at John.

But it was not John's place either to deny or acknowledge laughs. *She* had told him what to say; and had she appeared then and there dancing a fandango on the coping stones, he would have altered neither jot nor tittle of his formula.

Nor was he called upon to do so. Lord Tarporley's start was involuntary, as was the glance that followed. He quietly took out his card-case.

And then again Charlotte laughed gaily, and this time her treble tones had an unmistakable bass echo.

"Drat 'em," inwardly muttered John, justifiably annoyed at the failure of his set piece, "couldn't they ha' waited till he was off the doorstep?" For he opined by his lordship's face that he was likely to hear more of this. "And I said she was out, and would ha' swore it," continued he, resentfully; "and then she must go and larf! Wot's there to larf at?" with peevish discontent. "Larf, indeed!" receiving in respectful silence the cards Lord Tarporley handed him.

"Larf indeed!" repeated he, his eye following the retreating figure—and to do Tarpy justice, he walked steadily off the field, neither looking to right nor to left. "If he ain't a beauty he's a lord," cogitated the worldly-minded John; "and his hat do shine," summing up with genuine admiration.

For in his heart he had already despised Drax Rotherham's hat, even while careful for its safety and secrecy. Drax had meant to get a new one, and forgotten.

"S'pose she thinks him a tip-topper because he's six foot sixty," pursued Charlotte's indignant commentator, who shook in his shoes before her face, but could be very nasty downstairs in his pantry. "*I* don't see that it makes no difference. But all women's alike," with a sigh of disgust—for his own Mary Anne had just jilted him for a Life Guardsman as high as a telegraph post.

Next time the door-bell rang, it was answered by a morose creature, who looked so affronted at the summons, that poor Gerry Brown, who had brought with him a friend to engage Mrs. Sunning's attention (and ready to come on those or any other despicable terms), was fairly taken in. "Interrupted him and his girl," thought Gerry, with sympathy.

He considered himself a very knowing youth, and though he was disappointed as his predecessor had been, he was good-natured and did not linger.

The pair safely disposed of, John apostrophised them as was his habit. "You didn't 'ear her larf, *you* didn't; oh dear, no. You think she's at the Sunday School, p'raps? Or a settin' in the bewtiful gardens, under the trees? She ain't"—short and fierce. And grievous to relate, if Charlotte had peered through the pillars of the balcony at the moment, she would have seen a milk-pudding face, whose usual expression was peace and plenty not to say repletion, turned up towards her with its tongue out.

Charlotte, however, had other fish to fry. She heard bells—for those we have mentioned were only the precursors of others—and, indeed, it seemed as if a Gulf Stream had suddenly and unwarrantably propelled the whole world her way; but secure in John's fidelity, for he was a teeth-chattering coward if she did but look at him, despite reprisals in pantry solitude—secure, we say, and intent on making the most of her opportunity, Charlotte gave herself up to it heart and soul.

By-and-bye she told Mr. Rotherham candidly that she was glad he had been admitted.

"One person is so different from a crowd," she murmured; "and if you had come last Sunday we shouldn't have had any talk. It's not talk when you have to speak to everybody at once. I get awfully tired of it," and she lay back in her chair and clasped her hands at the back of her head.

"It's the penalty, you know," said he, smiling.

He understood quite well what he was meant to understand. She had wondered whether he would be stupid enough to ask. One or two enigmatical observations

she had been obliged to translate, for she was fond of talking in enigmas, and Drax was unused to them—but she soon found her pupil was quick enough, only needing practice.

“To tell the truth, I shouldn’t like it at all if I weren’t—weren’t—you know what,” continued Charlotte, responsive to the smile. “No girl likes to feel herself neglected; but I haven’t many real friends,” a shade stealing over her brow. “People can’t believe I care for anything but amusement and admiration—now isn’t it odd that I should be saying this to you?” she broke off suddenly, “to you who are the very most recent acquaintance I possess? I daresay you are thinking at this moment that it is all nonsense——”

“Indeed, I am thinking nothing of the kind.”

“It is such a relief to meet with some one who answers me like that. I hate to be laughing and chaffing in season and out of season. And on Sundays I am generally in a sober mood.”

“Sunday is a very jolly day,” said Drax, a little bewildered. “At least for us who work all the week.”

“Who doesn’t work all the week? I am sure I do; work like a galley slave while the season is on; and even at other times it is all one can do to hold one’s own”—but as this was not the kind of thing to suit, she turned it off deftly. “With a large family connection, as my mother calls it, and so many things one is interested in, one’s time never seems one’s own. Sunday is——” she hesitated, wondering what Sunday ought to be.

“The day for one’s *friends*,” said Drax, promptly.

He really was a charming man; she leaned back in her chair, and eyed him with a fresh and critical interest. ‘Friends’ he had said significantly; she would turn the plural into the singular; her future Sundays (for the present) should be reserved for her ‘friend’.

She would not let him depart. Twice he rose, and twice Charlotte with imperious gesture, waved him down.

"You mayn't catch me like this again."

But he knew he should.

She was only flirting, of course; Rotherham was by no means a fool, and the signs of the times were obvious even to the meanest understanding—indeed, Charlotte did not care to hide them—but what pleasant, graceful toying it was, always just tinged with that underlying seriousness which was the most subtle flattery. Scarcely a word but meant "I am treating you differently from others". Every look said "I like you".

To be thus liked warms and glows the veins. It suggests ideas and topics—how easily we talk when all we say seems right.

And if such speech be 'silver,' surely the silences that follow are 'golden'. Again and again there fell a silence between the two thus secluded for a brief space from all the world, and Drax did not feel awkward or embarrassed. He was in no hurry again to begin conversation. He waited for Charlotte to take the initiative, and when she did, the soft, well-modulated tones of her voice scarcely broke the spell.

As he walked away from the house he took out his watch. It was six o'clock. He had been there for two hours. Good Heavens! two hours making a morning call, and no time was left for the couple of others intended to have been knocked off the same afternoon.

Two mortal hours had he been philandering on a balcony! Back went the watch into his waistcoat pocket, and the young man rubbed his eyes, waking up.

Of course he had meant to do the civil by Miss Sunning, and of course it was a piece of luck finding her at home and alone, but he hoped he hadn't made a mess of it. Overshot the mark. Allowed himself to

amble round a pretty girl who, bored with her own company, put up with his *faute de mieux*, and was now perhaps laughing to herself over his subjugation. What a frightful ass she must think him if she supposed his head turned by a little commonplace chattiness, eked out by a pair of fine eyes!

Certainly he had ogled back; he had not been in India for ~~nothing~~. When women looked at you like that they expected something in return; but to suppose that he had been—(ha, ha, ha! he threw his head back and laughed)—really and seriously impressed would be a joke indeed.

"I daresay she never supposes anything of the kind, however," reflected he, after a minute's brisk walking. "So clever a girl is not likely to make that mistake. She must have seen that I took her as she took me; that we both played the game and understood each other. Of course it was all rot about my being different from other men; that's the stock thing to say, but anyway I was worth the saying it to, and that's something"—elation stealing back. "And, poor girl, I daresay it's true enough that she gets sick of things sometimes, and would like to be not quite such a gad-about and butterfly as she is. We are all better at heart than we give out. It isn't the thing to be serious and sensible. Miss Sunning's-admirers would hoot at the idea, and you can't expect a fashionable beauty to like to be laughed at."

He reflected with satisfaction that Charlotte had neither appeared to expect him to laugh, nor had he done so. "I am sure she liked that," thought he.

Presently he began to strut. "I knew how to take her; I didn't din fashionable talk into her ears. I let that sort of thing alone; and how much better she showed off talking quietly with me than when she was

on the rattle with that Henley set. She said no one she knew cared for books, or poetry, or Nature. Jolly well not. As for religion?" He looked in front of him thoughtfully.

Hitherto his own religion had been, he must confess it, of the taken-for-granted order; but he had always meant his wife, if he ever married, to be a religious woman. He had seen something of the other sort—he knew the kind of lives their husbands led—had, indeed, an instance of the same before his eyes as he paced the Piccadilly pavement, mentally back in his Calcutta lodging with poor Jack Pennington's drawn face and dreary smile as companion for his bachelor solitude.

Jack used to come in to pour out his woes. "And yet when you met her going about she was the jolliest, prettiest creature, and it was always 'Jack and the children' with her, as if she and they—pah! it made one sick when one knew the truth," reflected Jack's friend, the one friend who could be trusted to be dumb.

With genuine regret Drax had left the poor fellow behind when the hour of parting came. "Is there anything I can do for you?" the home-going traveller had enquired.

It was only the usual formula, but he could not forget the heavy sigh and the emphatic "*Nothing*" which followed—a response understood by both to have such a deep and painful meaning.

"*Nothing*," repeated Drax Rotherham to himself, threading his way through the block of cabs and omnibuses at Hyde Park Corner, and clear as day before his eyes rose to view the compressed lips, and the faint hopeless motion of the head which accompanied the words.

Nothing. No one could do anything. The miserable home was not in the ordinary sense of the word disgraced, rather it was on the surface all flowery path and

gaiety—but while day after day, and night after night, the lovely Mrs. Pennington sparkled and shone, Pleasure's fairest votary, the despised husband and neglected little ones, impatiently endured as mere appendages, knew too well what lay beneath the sweetness and the sunshine.

"Now, what on earth am I thinking of all that for?" Suddenly our pedestrian roused himself from his reverie on nearing Victoria Station. "If I were a marrying man—which I'm not, and never likely to be—I should do well to take to heart a lesson from poor Jack Pennington; but what should have brought that old story up to-day?—stop, I have it," as a thought occurred, "it was that, was it?" excitedly. "She *is* like. Flo Pennington was fairer-haired and thinner in the face, but it was the same kind of face, with the large eyes and the long eye-lashes—the full lips, too, that part and hesitate before she speaks," dwelling now on the present, now on the past. "I knew there was some one I was reminded of all along. The likeness is not striking; I don't suppose everybody would see it—but it is there. And she has the same, or something the same trick of manner. That winning, charming, confiding manner—poor Jack used to groan beneath it; poor fellow, it took him in when he was worth the taking; but of course it was not the pleasantness and the charmingness, it was the rottenness beneath which embittered his life. Miss Sunning may be like another pretty woman without——"

"This way, sir! Train's just going, sir!"

To Rotherham's surprise he was in the station, presenting his ticket; and as the next minute he was accosted by a neighbour also returning home after a round of Sunday calls, he had no further opportunity for analysing the resemblance between the two beauties.

CHAPTER IV.

"HEADS OR TAILS? TAILS, AS I LIVE!"

OF course Addy was waiting for him when he got back.

"Well?" said she, stealing her hand within his arm. She was not at all surprised to hear that he had got no farther than Charles Street. That was as it should be; that meant future possibilities and probabilities; she listened with secret delight to his half-shamefaced account of his lengthy stay and the *splitude à deux* of the balcony.

True, Drax had to own that nothing was said which could be construed into any present desire on the part of his hostess to become acquainted with his people, and, indeed, he recalled with a faint remorse that he had scarcely mentioned his people at all; when Charlotte questioned him about his life it would have been the time to do this, but somehow he had not done it—he had taken another tack and unclosed to the eye of this stranger not a few of the inner workings of the mind and heart into whose mysteries no one hitherto had cared to pry.

Drax was not of a secretive nature, and a sympathetic companion of his own age in the family circle would probably have learned ere this all there was to learn, but he could not talk to Addy, who, in his eyes, was a child, as though she were a woman of the world.

Miss Sunning was certainly a woman of the world,

albeit only two or three and twenty. At Henley he knew that. No one could be half an hour in Charlotte's company without knowing it; and though, had she been his sister, he could have wished her not quite so obviously *au fait* with the latest scandal, nor so quick to catch the breath of the on-coming one, since she was only an acquaintance, it was no business of his.

The knowledge and the quickness made her uncommonly easy to talk to.

"The fact is, Addy, women who have knocked about a bit are the amusing ones," quoth he, airily, "the others are, more or less, heavy on hand. Not as sisters of course," laughing and pulling her towards him, "no one wants you and Evie to go and gather up all the town talk by way of being smart and witty. But your friends down here——"

"We haven't got any friends, Drax," eagerly.

"The girls who come about you are rather dull company, aren't they?"

"Deadly. Oh, Drax, I know. Don't suppose that I don't know how tiresome, and stupid, and narrow they are. They are quite taken up with what goes on *here!*" unspeakable contempt in her tone.

"I say," said he, amused, "'tis as well they don't hear you, Parson Rotherham's daughter. There would be the—ahem!—to pay if they did. Besides, it's no use being superior to your company, you know. You have got to live in this place, and it is a good place enough: it won't make you any happier, dear," his tone changing to seriousness, "to be discontented with it."

"Did Miss Sunning invite you to anything, Drax?" After a momentary check Adeline resumed the conversation at a practical point. She never argued with her brother, but secretly she took umbrage at the word 'discontented'. It was a disagreeable, common-sound-

ing word. Surely she might have some ambition, some aspirations without these being put down to petty, trumpery discontent. "He didn't like it any better than I do when he first came," murmured she to herself; "he found the people here dull enough, and now he only wants to reconcile me to them because he thinks I should be happier. Why should I be happier, when that would simply mean that I was sinking to their level?" and she flushed a little, albeit too timid to rebel openly.

"I promised to go up again next Sunday," said Drax, in reply to the interrogation above recorded. "She asked me to something in the week, but I told her it was no use, I was not free in the day-time."

"You could have gone to dinner."

"So I thought, but I was not asked to dinner."

The truth was Charlotte had debated the dinner question with herself and come to the conclusion that her new friend was not worth it. There were men who had to be dined; who dined her in return—or were good for other things—but it was always a bore; she and her mother liked to eat their few little pet dishes by themselves—both being gastronomically inclined—and not to pay for the gratification of other palates. Butchers and fishmongers kept tit-bits for Mrs. Sunning, but they would hardly have understood a lavish order.

And Charlotte had seen Rotherham fed on board the houseboat, and laughed at the way the cold beef was mown down by his sickle. He swept the slices into his own or any other plate with equal enjoyment. He liked carving. When rallied upon his appetite, he owned that it never flagged even in the hottest weather. "Oh, Lord, I do envy you," ejaculated Tarpoley, leaning his elbows on the table, and sighing at a salad which ought to have tempted him and did not.

“We can always invite Tarpy; he pecks like a bird; and the little odds and ends we have for ourselves are good enough for him,” Charlotte would say—but she did not see Mr. Drax Rotherham sitting down to odds and ends.

Besides Drax would come on other terms. Just for the present, Sunday afternoons were sufficient; and though there were but a couple or so more of them before the break-up of the season, a good deal could be done on those two occasions.

And beyond the two occasions there stretched forth the shadow of an idea.

“You are not going to the Mitchams’, nor to the Tarporleys’, nor to your aunt Henrietta’s!” exclaimed Mrs. Sunning, in accents of amazement mingled with dismay, a short time after this. “And it was you yourself, Charlotte, who made out the list! Where then, pray, are we to go? I am sure I cannot afford——”

“All the clothes, and the tips, and the journeys,” supplied Charlotte, promptly. “We should be ruined at the end of our tramp—for, of course, we should have to take in dozens of other houses if we once started. I have got a much better plan in my head.”

“I daresay. A yacht to Norway, or an hotel at Trouville, or perhaps a Scotch moor of our own? Your plans are usually delightful till one comes to pay the bills.” The lady was in a captious mood, consequent on the postal delivery of a number of said bills near akin to those above alluded to. Charlotte calmly surveyed them, took up one or two and appeared to meditate.

“Yes, these will have to be paid—some time. Meantime we must live cheap.”

“Your ‘cheap’ is other people’s ‘dear’. You are so dreadfully extravagant. To think of giving twenty-

five guineas for an opera cloak! However, that is your affair" (Charlotte had a small income of her own), "only it usually comes out of me in the long run. When you will spend so much on your dress, you have nothing left to help with other things"—and Mrs. Sunning turned over the pile afresh, longing and not daring to say all that was in her heart.

Each season she hoped would be her last with Charlotte as an unmarried daughter, and consequently as every spring came round she forbore to protest against the annual outlay, and started afresh with her smart little house, her victoria, and her card-case.

She would feel then full of hope and confidence. Charlotte would have a free hand as to florists and upholsterers, and no word would be said even in respect to the livery stables whence extra vehicles were provided for night work.

Occasionally Lady Henrietta would wonder to Kitty, her sensible Kitty, why the Sunnings should deem it necessary to do everything on such a scale, considering that her poor brother, although able to leave his widow and daughter well off, extraordinarily well off for a military man, had never considered himself under any obligation to cut a figure in the world.

"Poor James was content to live quietly at a small seaside place after his retirement," observed she; "and Cecilia seemed quite satisfied to remain there also, as long as he lived. They had quite a pleasant circle. She was always a sociable person, and used to collect people about her in a wonderful way. I remember I said once to her: 'My dear, where do all these people come from?' But I never expected to see her stepping in and out of a house in Mayfair."

"And looking the part," said Kitty, laughing. "Whenever I see a particularly smart pair of heads pass up

Charles Street in a victoria, I know they belong to aunt Cecy and Charlotte."

"It is rather ridiculous their posing as London women, however," said Lady Henrietta, who had a dislike to and yet, strange anomaly, a sort of shuddering respect for the genuine London woman. Not for worlds would she have claimed the title for herself, but she thought she could if she chose. "Cecilia, the daughter of a mere professional man, and Charlotte, who ran wild by the sea till she was nearly grown up! What can they know?" appended she now.

"What don't they know? My dear mother," Kitty paused, laughed a little, and demanded abruptly, "do you think I am a London woman?"

"You ought to be—that is to say, of course you do not wish to be, I trust I have brought you up differently—but you have never known the time when your father had not a Town house, and lived in it the greater part of the year—all the Parliamentary season in short."

"And you think that ought to have made me a smart up-to-date girl of the period? My dear, Charlotte thinks I am the veriest greenhorn on the face of the earth. And I am, compared with her."

But Kitty was loyal and would not enlarge, though pressed to do so. Her mother liked Charlotte, they all liked Charlotte, her father would do for Charlotte what he would do for no one else, and what was the use of showing her up when no one ever asserted that she was a perfect character?

We have said somewhere before that this beautiful young creature exercised a fascination over all who came within her influence, and nowhere was this more keenly felt than in her uncle's house. One and all would find their way into the drawing-room if Charlotte were there. If she asked for a companion she could have her pick.

Lady Henrietta would hurry upstairs to don her bonnet and mantle, if invited to chaperon her niece; and would be quite tart with Kitty, if Kitty suggested a previous engagement. *That* did not signify—was not of the slightest consequence—she would send an apology afterwards. Her ladyship would bustle her maid in order not to keep Charlotte waiting.

Anon, it is Kitty who is all elation at being offered a seat in the opera-box lent her cousin—Kitty who had been going to a theatre the same night. “Rosie can go,” cries she, ordering her best dress from the wardrobe.

“Can I have a few of your diamonds, mother? Charlotte has begun to wear diamonds.”

Lady Henrietta does not approve of girls wearing diamonds, but is won over to lend a brooch or two because it is Charlotte's box, and Charlotte——

“Of course she knows,” asserts the eager Kitty. “Indeed, mother, Charlotte knows.”

“Still I don't see why we should do exactly as Charlotte——” etc., etc.

They all do, however; and when Charlotte comes in—she rather likes coming in to show herself on her way to things—and cries out at Kitty's splendour, protesting that she herself is quite eclipsed, and regretting that they have only got a wretched little box out of sight of everybody, while Kitty is fit for the grand tier and the grand tier only, the solemn Dimsdales, from uncle Dimsdale downwards, are mightily pleased with such warmth of approbation.

“And didn't Charlotte herself look stunning?” cries Master George, the son and heir. George is nineteen, and susceptible.

His father rallies him. Charlotte is only four years older than he, and what are a few years more or less?

“Ah! but she doesn’t think so!” replies the youngster knowingly. He had taken Ferox major to call on his dashing cousin, and the dashing cousin had been found at a wrong moment and snubbed the lads accordingly. “She thinks too much of herself by a howling lot,” the discomfited George had protested on retiring; but having been soothed down and restored to complacency by Charlotte’s “Oh, George, I was so horrid to you the other day, but I was feeling so bad; and do tell that nice boy how it was, and say I was a beast and ashamed of myself”—having, we say, thus been brought round, all that remained in the aggrieved one’s bosom was an ardent desire to be older.

Presently we shall see how Charlotte worked that thorn. She never saw George without doing something either to please or vex him. Occasionally she sent him away in a state of high exaltation. It was so splendid to belong to the favourite, and parade himself as her cousin; especially when the relationship produced a club dinner or a seat on a drag. He invited fellows to Foxleigh Manor with an air, when producing a list of the house-party in which Miss Sunning’s name was included.

“But Charlotte has not fixed her date yet,” his mother would demur, if pressed on the point beforehand.

“Then let me know when she does,” George would reply.

He could not have St.-John Ferox come down to a second-rate lot. Ferox would spot directly if the right people were there or no; and he had hurried round to Charles Street on the very morning of the day on which we find his aunt and cousin in conclave over their bills, to try and extract some definite proposal from the latter.

Charlotte had been sweet to him. Of course she

was going to Foxleigh, she always looked forward to a lovely visit there.

"And shan't we steal the peaches, George?" But just at the moment she could not say how it would fit in with the rest of the campaign.

"I suppose you are going to Scotland first?" suggested he, wistfully. "I do wish the governor would take a Scotch moor. It is such rot our not having one when every one else has. Can't you persuade him, Charlotte?"

"My dear George! Me persuade uncle Dimsdale!"

"You could if any one could. He thinks a lot of your opinion."

"That shows his kindness—and his discrimination. But you, my dear boy, have an equal discrimination, for you say, '*If* any one could,' and thereby hangs the gist of the matter. It all dangles on that little word '*if*'."

"Anyhow, I think we ought to have one," rejoined he sturdily. "It sounds so tame to be just going down to garden-parties and cricket when all the other people are off to the moors. But we needn't take a swagger one."

"When you take one at all, invite me, George."

"Oh, of course. That's what I say; *you* would come and all the best people would come if we had anything to give them. Now I suppose it will be September before you come near us?" artfully thinking of Ferox major.

But although Charlotte had laughed and nodded, and talked about the nice little partridges, and the jolly luncheons among the stubble fields, he found when he went away that he had nothing to tell his mother.

"I *suppose* she will come, but goodness knows when," muttered he, in wrathful perplexity.

He had to see his friend that afternoon about times and seasons, for, in his way, Ferox major was as much sought after as Charlotte, and could not be had save by baiting the hook and throwing it a long distance ahead.

Nor would it have helped poor George much could he have overheard the conversation to which his early call gave rise, and of which we have already offered a sample to our readers. It will be remembered that Charlotte announced she had a plan in her head.

"Why should we have all the worry of rushing from place to place," cried she, "when it is nothing but 'How-d'ye-do' and 'Good-bye,' and packing and unpacking the whole time? And the endless dress and talk; and half my things are only fit for hot weather and the south; I should have to get tweeds and mackintoshes and all sorts of horrors for the moors. Besides I am sick to death of the people. I want to be quiet after the racket of the last two months."

"Well, perhaps. Yes, *I* have had enough of it, I am sure," and Mrs. Sunning dubiously surveyed the bills. "If you really mean 'quiet'; but you, Charlotte, have always been the one who could not do without 'a breath of mountain air' and the 'glorious Hebridean sea'" (quoting sarcastically) "as soon as ever August came round."

"Hebridean sea be—far from me," rejoined Charlotte, gaily. "Very far indeed. I have no hankerings this year. As for the mountain air, I believe it would give me—a cold."

"That is to say, you have a fancy to go somewhere else," said her mother, half-amused, half-impatient, "and perhaps I may now be informed where?"

"Oh, my dear mother, why that tone? When you have

been informed you will simply skip for joy. Listen, there is a little cottage, quite a cot—('mine be a cot beside a rill,') in parenthesis—only the rill is a broad and beautiful river in the present instance; and into this cot so humble, so meek, so retired from the gay and madding crowd—still there's a village and a pub, so you could get your victuals cheap—I propose to insert two jaded, weary beings who have forsworn the world and its follies for the space of six weeks or two months from the end of next week. I have both heard and seen the said cot. I went, I saw, I did not exactly take it, but I opened negotiations. It was the day I was up the river with the Mitchams, mother," continued Charlotte in a more natural tone. "We all landed somewhere or other for tea, and were strolling about, when Mr. Rotherham and I lit upon this little gem of a cottage, and out of curiosity, as it was to let, we went over it. I fell in love with the place——"

"Or with him?"

"With him! Oh, dear me, no! Not with poor old Drax. I have only known him a few weeks, but I feel as if he were one of my most ancient of days. He really is awfully nice, though you don't care for him——"

"I never said I did not care for him, but what I do say is that you are a fool to go on with him as you do. Already people are talking. Lord Tarporley has got hold of it, and Sir George Tregillis looked as black as thunder the other night. You know I never interfere in your affairs——"

"I know, and that is why we hang together as we do. If you were a tiresome, inquisitive woman like Lady Mitcham, or a white elephant like Henny-Penny, we shouldn't get on at all, and who would have the worst of it then, my dear? No nice little runs to Ascot and

Goodwood for you if I said, ‘Leave mother out’. I always insert you when I can; and I tell you quite as much as it is good for a parent to know. In return, you are a very tolerably well-trained parent. You sigh over me quite respectably to Henny-Penny and the rest of them and—between ourselves—you let me do precisely as I choose. I assure you I make you out a most creditable personage to my friends; I say, ‘My mother would never hear of it,’ and throw up my hands in horror at some of Tarpy’s propositions; and poor dear Gerry Brown at any rate is quite taken in. He thinks you all that is alarming and formidable. You are certainly a most convenient ‘Jorkins’ to hurl at troublesome heads; and though Jorkins has to subside within the sanctum of these four walls, Jorkins should be grateful and not expect too much. Jorkins has a daughter who is very much admired; that in itself is a privilege worth paying for; and, on the whole, the daughter isn’t a bad daughter—she is rather fond of her old mum——”

“Charlotte, Charlotte! you know you can do anything with me.”

“I know”—a softer expression stole over Charlotte’s face—she spoke quietly and pleasantly. “I have really thought over this plan, mother, from your point of view as well as mine. The only reason why I said nothing about it before was to save your having to explain and all that, to people who talk and talk, and then go away to talk still more behind our backs. You can’t keep anything to yourself. It’s no fault of yours, dear, but you are a perfect sieve. So, thinks I, just hold hard till they are all off the field, and we left to our own devices. I should not even say a word to the Henny-Pennys if I were you. Let it be that we are going to Foxleigh some time, as we are going to Strathcarum Castle, and

all the other harum-scarums some time—then, when that time, or those times, comes—bless us and save us, what grammar!—we are dreadfully and terribly disappointed, but we shall have to give them up because you are not fit for long journeys and visits. See?”

“They will know it is you, Charlotte.”

“Let them. They can’t know it more than it is.”

“I am sure *I* don’t mind,” said Mrs. Sunning, after a pause; “it seems rather waste of an autumn, that is the only thing. We had some good houses to go to, and one never knows who one may meet at them.”

“One knows who one mayn’t and won’t meet; anything in the shape of a man better-looking, or more attractive, or, worse still, more eligible than the man whose house we are in. Anybody likely to cut him out with your humble servant, in short.”

“Yes. That is true enough; I have often remarked that,” rejoined her mother, bitterly; “there is a great fuss about the pleasant party we are to find assembled, and we hear of this one and that one being invited, and it all ends in a few insignificant detrimentals, who are like the supers in a theatre—they do to fill up the background, while you and your host are inseparable and never supposed to be separated.”

“Precisely what would happen if we went to the Tarporleys, the Mitchams, the Browns, and all the rest. Gerry expects us too, you know. I am really sorry for Gerry, but he would be appalling on his own ground. As for Sir George Tregillis, I don’t think I ever said I would go among his Cornish gulls.”

“Did he ever invite you?”

“Well, no,” said Charlotte, laughing. “But that’s a detail. An invitation might have been wrung from him, had it been desirable. Anyhow you see the value of

staying on behind the rest in London. Now that they are all scattered, we can do as we like. Shall we take this humble cot?"

"Whereabouts is it? How far from Town?"

"Within an hour of Paddington station. There's cheapness for you. Extra reductions on return tickets from Saturdays to Mondays."

"Considering that we are not likely to want many return tickets, nor to have need of Saturday to Monday ones at all, the reduction on them is certainly important," said Mrs. Sunning, drily.

Charlotte laughed, appreciating the quickness.

"My dear, you read me like a book; what should I do if I had a stupid Henny-Penny for a parent? Henny would have said, 'How nice!' and thought I really meant it. Whereas you, with your accustomed insight into character——"

"It is this Rotherham, I suppose. And he has to think about shillings and sixpences, no doubt. But why, then, go so far? Could not a villa at Norwood, to which he could come in a tram—or why a tram? we might be within a walk—I am surprised you did not between you think of this."

"Norwood has certainly a very fine air," said Charlotte, gravely; "but, unfortunately, Norwood has disadvantages which counterbalance its salubrity. It possesses an inconvenient number of eyes and ears. When one wishes to enjoy a friend's society, one does not care to be told of it by all the people one meets next day."

"You need not know people."

"Not Mr. Rotherham's people? He would hardly see that. We should be at the mercy of the black-coated ex-parson and the draggle-tailed misses-parson all day

long. Drax himself *en famille*, hum!" She pulled a wry face.

"I thought so," said Mrs. Sunning, eyeing her keenly, yet not without a sense of relief. "You are not quite colour-blind yet. You know you could not stand the man's people; quite low, I daresay they are——"

"Not 'low' at all." Suddenly Charlotte nettled up. "As well-born as you or I. Better, I fancy, on one side of the house. There are Draxes big landowners down in the West; his mother was one of them, hence the name. But they are not our style," resumed she, after a pause, "and we shouldn't hit it off. Besides, it might be awkward presently."

"When you have done with him."

"When I have done with him. Precisely; if you choose to put it so. It certainly must be from you that I get my plain speaking, my dear mamma. But now, listen to me, and let us be nice to each other. None of those nasty, underhand cuts, mum; you are an adept at giving them, and they *are* spicy, I allow; but we shan't get any forrarder if we keep fencing round and round. You are trying to find out about Drax. Very naturally. I should do the same in *your* place. Well, as you have given in about the cot——"

"I never said I had."

"As you mean to give in, put it like that, you shall know all there is to know, as a reward. Your imagination has been outrunning the constable as usual. The moment a pair of trousers appears on our doorstep, it sets to work to discover if those trousers are paid for, or had on tick. If paid for, deduct the sum from the annual income, and what remains? That is the arithmetical puzzle you set yourself. You don't bother with the ticky gentlemen. Now, Mr. Drax Rotherham does not precisely belong to either class, my dear mother.

He is neither a plutocrat nor a pauper. You needn't beam upon him as a millionaire, nor frown upon him as a detrimental."

"I know all this very well, Charlotte. He has a good post in the City, but he has to support a family out of what he gets by it."

"Not altogether; however, that's no matter. What I want you to see is that while Drax is not a man to be pooh-poohed——"

"But I think he *is*. That is just what he *is*."

Charlotte looked at her mother, who had risen to her feet, flushed and obviously under excitement. The eyes of both met, then fell, as if by a common instinct, on the bills still lying on the breakfast table.

"You would not, you could not think of marrying him," continued Mrs. Sunning in agitated accents. "You need not tell me that I am ridiculous, I know you better than you know yourself. I can see that you are taken with this man, more taken than you care to own. You talked about him from the first. Latterly you have *not* talked—a surer sign. He is, of course, attractive; and you, though you affect to be insensible, I should say unimpressible, are less so than you give out. Charlotte, I do warn you, I do beseech you not to be carried away. It would be too dreadful, too terrible."

Her hands nervously collecting the bills as she spoke would have clasped themselves had they not been thus busy.

"My poor dear, you are really tragic," said Charlotte with a smile.

"Tragic!" The widow drew breath to begin again, hesitated, and the moment was lost.

"I am quite sorry for you," continued Charlotte, lightly. "The idea is colossal, and you have been nursing it and cherishing it till it has completely muddled your head."

Why on earth did you not tell me sooner? It would have saved you so much. I am not——” she seemed to cast about in her mind for language sufficiently strong and conclusive, “I have as little desire to marry Drax Rotherham as he has to marry me. Stop! that’s no good. How shall I put it to be convincing now and for ever more? So that you shall never think such a thought again. So that, whatever happens, you shall be sure of me as I am of myself. Can’t you see, can’t you feel? I suppose not, or this would never have arisen. Well then, never let it arise again. If that does not satisfy you, we will give up the cot. We will go to the Mitchams, and the Tarporleys, and all the other people. Upon my word of honour, I have only a passing fancy for Drax; it may be rather a hot one, perhaps it is, and as I have got to tell the truth about it, I did think it would be rather nice to see more of him unbeknownst to the world. It would have been a joke—nothing more. Let us give it up, and fling ourselves back upon the rabble. After all, they are our own rabble; while this agreeable novelty belongs to another race of beings. I am a little sorry, but your alarm has raised mine, I might—no, I should say, he might, we both might go deeper than we intend.” She spoke rapidly, passing on from point to point. “Therefore let us be cautious, let us be prudent; let us write at once to the agents and say, ‘Friends, second thoughts are great and prevail. We will have none of you and your allurements. In vain is your net spread. Beauteous as is your rustling bower overspread with clematis, it contains earwigs.’ Let us put it on the earwigs, mum. You can’t abide ’em, no more can I.”

“Still it might have been a nice plan,” mused Mrs. Sunning, wistfully. Her mind was now at rest about Drax, and she could think of lesser issues. “You say

it was a cheap little house?" She had ever an eye for anything cheap.

"Oh, cheap enough. Thirty pounds a month."

"What!" ejaculated her mother, indignantly. "Thirty pounds a month! Outrageous. Thirty pounds for——"

"A house on the river. It is really very little. Other houses fetch that by the week. The Hartlepoons are getting thirty-five a week for theirs."

"I daresay. Riverside Court is a *place*. We never thought of taking a 'place'. I understood this cottage of yours——"

"Still it is a cottage on the river. We all know what the river means in August. All things considered—for it has its bit of lawn, its little boat-house and boat, its nook under the trees——"

"I see you are still hankering after it."

"Perhaps. And for that very reason let it go. A line to-day will settle the matter; and I promised to send it one way or other. So as we have decided——"

"But I wish we did not need to decide," Mrs. Sunning rose and moved about the room, balancing pros and cons in her mind. The season had been, as it always was, a strain on her mind, her body, and her purse. It had produced nothing; nothing but those vile bills in her hand. If she elected to take Charlotte at her word, abandon the scheme which promised some measure of rest and refreshment for herself, and only a little harmless amusement for her daughter, she must gather up her strength again, put worries and anxieties on one side, and be the gay, charming guest, pleasing and pleased, at a series of houses whose owners, she well knew, neither cared for her society nor her presence, and only tolerated them for Charlotte's sake.

For Charlotte's matrimonial sake she would indeed have faced it all; but she did not need to tell herself

that it was no question of matrimony in the present instance; there was not a visit on their projected list which, so far as seen at present, held out a prospect of the kind—and this had been realised in full when accepting the invitations.

For Charlotte had laughed at her mother, being in no hurry herself to clip her wings, she said.

"She would simply flirt and have what she called 'a good time,' " reflected the perturbed parent; "and I should have it cast in my teeth that it was my doing. She would tell every one that *she* was anxious for retirement and ruralising, but that *I* could not stand it. While I—oh, dear me! how thankful I should be just to sit still and do nothing!" Aloud: "Charlotte!"

"At your service," said Charlotte, gaily.

"As you have given me your solemn assurance that I have nothing to fear from Drax Rotherham——"

"That he will neither burgle your house by night, nor tip you into the river by day, well?"

"I don't know but that we might take the cottage."

"Take my advice rather. Don't."

"It would be, as you say, a rest. I am feeling more than usually done up with the heat this summer, and the last three months have been a racket from first to last; so, if you could be content to be quiet, and not bring down hordes of people upon us——"

"I am to have only Drax? Isn't that a little dangerous?"

"You must have some one. I suppose he would be have himself. No, you needn't begin: I have never said he was not a gentleman—indeed, I consider his manners rather better than those of most of your friends. He is always polite to me, which I can't say some of the are. Lord Tarporley forgot to say 'Good-bye' the last

time he was here, even though he was arranging with you that we should go to visit them!”

“Tarpy has no manners; no one ever thought he had.”

“I am sure I am glad you never thought of him, Charlotte.”

“So am I, as he never thought of me.”

“But you would not, at any rate? I always tell your aunt Henrietta so.”

“Henny-Penny knows better than to believe you. I have never had the offer of Tarpy, and I doubt if any one else has. Tarpy is not a domestic man, and neither his fond mamma (who hates me) nor any one else had better pry into his affairs. I don't say that I should have agreed to be my Lady Tarporley under other circumstances, mind you; but I am quite sure of this, that no woman ever really knows what she will do in that line till she is asked. You may prevent the asking, or you may do exactly as you expected to do if it comes off—but you can't know that you will—I say, you *can't*,” she reiterated with a kind of suppressed vehemence which, contrasting as it did with her former cool and careless tone, startled her mother. Could it be this Rotherham Charlotte was thinking of?

“No, I have not Drax in my eye,” said Charlotte, as if some one had spoken. “You are thinking of him; I see it in your face; but I am thinking of nobody or anybody. I often think. I observe. I reflect. Then people wonder where I get my wisdom from? What about the cottage, eh?” briskly renewing the subject. “We wander and wander from it, as women always do; and it is eleven o'clock, and I promised to let Hampton know by twelve. Shall we toss for it?” seizing a shilling which lay on the table.

“Toss for it? You child! No, really, Charlotte——”



"We will, though. Heads, Tarpy and the rest of them ; tails, the cot."

"Absurd! No, no!"

But Charlotte shook her mother off.

"Heads? Tails? Which?" cried she, slapping her hand down over the shilling which she had just thrown up. Then suddenly withdrawing it, "Tails, as I live!"

Without another word she turned and left the room.

CHAPTER V.

CHARLOTTE'S FRIENDS DISCUSS THE SITUATION.

"*WHAT!*" exclaimed George Dimsdale, passionately.

Poor George, he had never thought it could be as bad as this. He had waited and waited, solacing himself with such scraps of variety as came in his way during the long, hot August days, but he had always held it a fixture in his own mind that in September his grand house-party would come off, and all other plans and projects had reference to this event.

One invitation in particular, a really nice invitation, he had given up almost with triumph, for it would have clashed, of that he was sure, with the time ultimately decided upon by Charlotte.

And now to find that time was no time!

"Let me see the letter," demanded he, mistrustful of his senses.

"Certainly if it is true that her mother is unwell," murmured Lady Henrietta, but she cast a doubtful eye upon the missive as she handed it over. "Cecilia did not look well when we left Town, I must say; still, Charlotte does not generally——"

"You bet it isn't that!"

"My dear George!" But her ladyship's tone was mild, and in her heart she echoed the sentiment.

"She's been fooling us all along," cried he, breathing fast and furiously; "she only promised at all in order to be rid of us. And I've been putting my fellows off and

off until now; and telling them—oh! it's a shame, a beastly shame—she might have said at the first Fox-leigh wasn't good enough. Of course it isn't—we all know that. But she made out she would put up with us—it's all the governor's fault," he broke off, finding a new vent for indignation in the old grievance, "I hope he'll be satisfied now that he finds every one shirking, and not a soul to shoot the stubble."

"Charlotte would not shoot, you know, my dear."

"How can I ask fellows here, if there is no one for them to talk to?" Quick as thought he turned upon her. "I am expected to invite the guns; and I said I would, but I didn't bargain for—I told them there would be a party. St.-John Ferox wrote the other day, and I believe he is coming back from Scotland on purpose."

"We shall be very glad to see him," said Lady Henrietta, placidly. "After all, though Charlotte throws us over, there are others. The Godalming girls have promised a visit, and I particularly wish to ask Selina Burrige——"

"Good Lord! Ferox major and Selina Burrige!"

"She is a very nice girl, and much more of an age to suit your friend than your cousin Charlotte. Why not make it a *young* party?" suggested Lady Henrietta, with a happy thought. "You and Kitty invite the guests between you, and all amuse each other." And she beamed confidently, having no suspicion of the sting her words inflicted.

For very anger George laughed.

"Upon my word, ma'am, you are polite to your niece. I wish Charlotte could hear you. She is not to be included in a 'young' party—ha, ha, ha!"

"It may sound ridiculous," rejoined his mother, seriously, "but somehow I never do think of Charlotte as young. I try to remember that she is the little creature

I saw only a few years ago, with her hair down her back, and a wild, fresh, pretty face——”

“Do you mean she isn't pretty now?”

“My dear, she is beautiful. But it is the beauty of a woman. There is not a trace of the child left either in body or mind. I say to myself it is absurd that I should consider Charlotte's opinion of so much importance; it seems putting her out of her place altogether that her aunt, her father's sister, should feel uneasy till Charlotte has signified her approbation of a thing—but I cannot help it. And, to tell the truth, fond as I am of poor James's daughter, it is always something of a strain having her in the house. We have to be so terribly up to the mark all round. Charlotte expects a regular dinner-party every night, and full dress.”

“So would Ferox, I can tell you. You weren't thinking of putting him off with cold mutton and scraps?” He was recovering, he was able to argue and be argued with; and Lady Henrietta, who was good nature itself, far from resenting the cold mutton innuendo, laughed merrily.

“Mr. Ferox shall have the best of dinners, George.”

“Much good that will do;” but despondency had now succeeded to wrath. “He'll think I have been gammoning him about Charlotte.”

“Gammoning whom? What is it about Charlotte?” said a new voice in the doorway, and Kitty stood still, looking alternately at her mother and brother. “Has Charlotte written?”

“Your aunt is not well, and Charlotte——”

“Makes it an excuse for throwing us over,” struck in George, banging the table with his fist; “I have a great mind to go straight off to that damned cottage, and see if there is a thing the matter with her,” and he rose as he spoke; he was merely going out to ruminate and

re-arrange matters in his own mind, but Kitty misunderstood the movement, the black brow, and the adjective.

"Oh, George, don't!"

"Don't! Why not?"

"Don't try to find Charlotte out. You know she does—we all know she does say things that are not exactly—exactly so. It is not that she means any harm, but she says of herself her tongue is the tongue of a ready liar. She really said that."

"You bet your life it's true in this case. Aunt Cis is as fit as you or I."

"I—I—I think it's very likely," said poor Kitty, stammering.

"At any rate, it is not for us to seem to disbelieve whatever Charlotte may choose to say," quoth her mother, decisively. "I am sorry I cannot put faith in her statements any more than either of you do"—she was now convinced that she had never put it, but it may be doubted if without a leading rein she would have found this goal. "Still, I shall write civilly, of course. I shall write to your aunt. It will be easier; and I shall just say, without any great lamentation, that we are sorry Charlotte cannot come."

"What? Charlotte not coming!" It was Charlotte's uncle who now entered, the post-bag having brought him letters whose contents necessitated discussion. "Charlotte not coming *at all*?" He looked round, putting aside his own affairs in an instant.

"'Pon my word, she is a cool young lady," pronounced he, when discomfited looks and George's would-be careless whistle were explained. "But you can't catch Charlotte if she doesn't choose to be caught. And her own relations aren't grand enough for her, I suppose. She has some bigger houses to go to. George, this knocks your shooting-party on the head, eh? What are

you going to do about it?" he looked round generally, family arrangements not being in his line.

"I thought we might change it into a *young party*," replied Lady Henrietta, reverting to her former suggestion, despite its treatment at the hands of her son; "if Charlotte had said she was coming, I should have had to fill the house with smart people of her own sort, and drive about and get her invitations—she likes to go to Swan Hall and Chillingham, and the Duchess always asks her if she knows she is here—but now, if George cares to invite some of his friends, and Kitty," turning to her, "you can have Mary and Margy Godalming, and any others you choose——"

"Selina Burridge for me——" sardonically from George.

"We can have quite a nice little gathering," concluded her ladyship, telling herself that dear George was a little put out and disappointed, but that she *would* ask Selina all the same, and trust to the dear boy's good-feeling to treat her properly if she came.

"Why, ay! that will do," said Sir Herbert, philosophically; "I suppose that will have to do, since there's nothing else to be done. Hey, Kitty, you will score by this move, I take it. (You don't have much of a look-in when Charlotte is by"—to himself.) "Your mother gives you *carte-blanche* to invite all George's girls and all your own young men," continued he, facetiously; "you ought to have a good time, you two."

"Yes, sir. It will be very nice. We shall require bread-and-milk for supper at night. And I suppose some one will be good enough to tell us when it is our proper time to go to bed. My mother doesn't think Charlotte young enough to join this crowd," says poor George, bitterly.

"Ha, ha, ha! So you want some one to tell you your bedtime? Charlotte would tell you that fast enough, my boy, supposing she had any of her lords and gentlemen about her, and wanted you and your Feroxes out of the way. To the right about, wheel!" and to the ineffable vexation of the affronted lad, Sir Herbert, who thought himself a wag, went through a pantomime sufficiently intelligible to the person most concerned, if not indeed to all.

Here, however, Lady Henrietta, who never could bear to see any one unhappy, interposed with what she fondly hoped was oil upon the waters.

"Charlotte is an only child, and we all know that only children——"

"Damn only children!" shouted George, and slammed the door after him.

"Poor, dear boy!" murmured his mother. The rest laughed. No one thought any the worse of Charlotte; it was her admirers who were ridiculous.

At Tarporley Castle it was:—

"So our fair lady has another string to her bow, and I think I guess the string." Tarpy, with an imperturbable face, perused the epistle which was in purport a replica of that which had caused so much consternation among the Dimsdales. He had carried it off to the smoking-room, where sat Sir George Tregillis. "All the same, I back 'The Colonial' when it comes to the scratch," resumed he. "He may be bitten for the time, but he won't give himself away. I know the breed. It's matrimony or nothing with them."

"And Charlotte?" said Tregillis, lifting his eyes.

"Charlotte?"

"She wouldn't——"

"*Charlotte!*"—a new intonation. "Great Scott!" said Tarpy, lighting his cigar.

"Who will she end with?" said Tregillis, after a pause.

"The Lord knows! If I were to offer the humblest of opinions, I should suggest 'Peradventure nobody'."

"You are wrong there. Charlotte means to make a grand match."

"So has many a Charlotte before her."

"But there is no reason why she should not."

"None whatever, if she doesn't play the fool with 'The Colonial'."

Sir George frowned.

"Of course, he's not in the running. This little episode is a mere *passer-le-temps* business, but by-and-bye she will settle down and——"

"*Ranger* herself? My dear fellow, that, in a man's case, is easy; in a woman it's—different."

"Not at all," said Tregillis, jumping up briskly. "For instance, there's myself. I am not much. Still—— And if she would have me, I am not at all sure that I——"

"Aren't you? I am. You and I and half-a-dozen others are as keen as mustard now; now, while Charlotte spins herself round like a teetotum, and drops a curtsey first to one and then to the other, there isn't one of us that doesn't bob to the curtsey and dance a jig with her for as long as she pleases—but if she showed signs of dancing us up to the altar——" he shrugged his shoulders.

"I daresay she wouldn't make a bad sort of wife."

"To any one who wasn't her husband."

"Oh, come! You're in a temper," said Tregillis, placidly. "You are down upon Charlotte because she has chucked you for this visit. By the way, if she had been coming I should have had to go; so it's an ill wind——"

"Why should you have had to go? What d'y'e mean, you ass?" With his foot Tarpy kicked the other's foot good-humouredly.

"Because you wouldn't have let me stay," replied his friend, folding his hands with an air of assumed meekness. "I may be an ass, but asses have ears and eyes. As Charlotte isn't coming, I am permitted to sit tight and hear you cuss; but if Lady Tarporley had had another sort of letter this morning, it would have been, 'Tregillis, so sorry, but you must turn out!'"

Tarpy reddened.

"You blackguard!" He laughed, paused, and laughed again.

"You are a smart chap, despite appearances, George. You have an extraordinary insight into human nature. You sit with the face of a dumb animal—cow, for choice——"

"I was 'ass' just now."

"And nothing escapes you. Hitherto your merits have not been done justice to, my dear fellow. I for one have been blind to them; but although I have nursed a viper in my bosom——"

"Go on, 'viper'. It will be a whole menagerie in turn."

"I can't but yield my tribute of admiration," continued Tarpy, covering his retreat with a rattle of small shot. "I say, are you often taken like this? So clever, you know."

"Not very often, but the fit is bad while it lasts."

"So I should imagine. A pity Charlotte has not had the benefit of it."

"I am *always* clever when I am with her," said Tregillis, solemnly. "She suns me, and I burst into blossoms on every side. You would have been quite right to kick me out had she come; I should have made you

appear very small beer, very small indeed. I should have been sure to be in the vein too," and he sighed regretfully.

"I don't recall that you were much in the vein at Henley. It strikes me that you had to take a back seat there," observed Lord Tarporley, drily.

"Oh, very back. Yes, I backed into you who were behind me."

"While Drax Rotherham ran to pick us both up, and got laughed at by Charlotte for his pains," cried Tarpy, his eyes twinkling. "What a lark it was! The occupant of her ladyship's box was absolutely unaware of the honour, and always trying to shove some one else into it. Do you recollect that night when he could hardly be got to stay behind, after her planning so nicely to send all of us out of the way? If she has got her claws into him after all——"

"I say, it's too bad to talk of Charlotte's claws. She has the prettiest little hand——"

Lord Tarporley got up and walked over to his companion's chair.

"Don't you ever let that little hand fasten upon you, George Tregillis. It has a very firm hold, that little hand. I know what I'm talking about. You may chaff me about Charlotte, and of course you were right, confound you! about my not choosing to have any rivals here on my own ground; but though I don't see myself playing second-fiddle when my lady beats the time, if she wanted me to step out with her to the tune of the Wedding March—no, thank you. And she knows it. That is why we flirt together so peaceably. There isn't a woman I would sooner flirt with than Charlotte, there is——" he paused, and resumed with emphasis, "there is hardly a woman I wouldn't sooner marry!"

Sir George turned his cigar round and looked into its

eye. He had never seen the lively Tarpy more serious, and Tarpy could be serious sometimes.

The question now was, Should he go on with the conversation or not? It might chance to be awkward presently, supposing anything were to be said which could never be unsaid, and would always rise to the memory of each when they met. It *might* chance so. He could not say.

At present Tarporley and he stood on the same ground, but he was not prepared to face the future as definitely as his friend did. He stroked his knee, brushing off some ash which fell.

"I don't know," he murmured to himself, but aloud.

"Don't you? It's about time you did then," said Tarpy, shortly. After a pause he added. "Charlotte knows. You may take your oath on that."

"Am I to understand that you are off, anyhow?"

"If you mean matrimonially, yes. Or rather that I never was on. For more reasons than one there will be no new Lady Tarporley at present; for every reason there would never be Charlotte Sunning in that capacity."

"Have you anything against her?"

"Everything—as a wife. Nothing whatever, as anything else."

"Then if I *were* to——"

"You would have my heartiest congrats and all that. I should turn up at the wedding, and send you a silver cigar-case. But my advice to you, George, is—Don't."

"You're too good a fellow to throw yourself away," continued Lord Tarporley, after a silence during which he had eyed his friend uneasily. "And perhaps it isn't too late in the day for me—but if it is, just say so and I'll hold my tongue. Of course you'll forget that, ~~we~~ we ever talked like this. Give you my word I had no idea—we

are all Miss Sunning's friends, you know. There are a lot more of us in it. That young Brown——"

"A mere whipper-snapper!" said Tregillis, quickly. "Gerry Brown, ha, ha! She makes a butt of him."

"Do you know his story?"

"His story? Oh, come. His story? The boy has hardly begun to tweak up the ends of his moustache."

"He was engaged to Nelly Fitzarthur a year ago."

"And will be to a dozen Nellies before anything comes of it."

"Do you want to hear?" said Lord Tarporley, doggedly. "Anyhow, you had better hear. I thought you knew. Charlotte makes no secret of it. She got him away from his girl—a girl he had been fond of since he was a boy, and who would have suited him down to the ground. You know Nelly? A nice little creature, good as gold. Charlotte went down to stay at the Browns; found the engagement in full swing; parents delighted; young folks as happy as the day is long; wedding to come off as soon as Gerry had 'eaten his dinners' or something of that sort—an excuse to give him time to grow a bit older, as a fact—~~for~~ the Browns are rolling, and there was nothing else to wait for. Well, Charlotte appears upon this pastoral scene—I have her own word for it, mind you—and according to *her* it had all been a mistake; the simple swain had never known what the *grande passion* really meant; it remained for her charms to awaken the slumbering god. However that may be, poor little Nelly's day was over; and now you may see a long face haunting Charlotte wherever she goes——"

"The more fool he! I have seen the beggar, but I never thought him—I never thought of him at all. It must have been all in his own imagination."

Tarpy shrugged his shoulders.

"She never takes the slightest notice of the poor Brownling, as she calls him," persisted Tregillis. "She has asked me to save her from him more than once. Do you remember that last Sunday we were all there—by the way, I believe it was the first time Gerry had ever been let into the house—he had got in before us, and was hanging round the tea-table, glued to it—I can see him now—ready to crawl on all fours if only he might get near her that way or any way—and she gave me the tip to shove in before him. Then, when that wouldn't do, she sent him on a message to her mother."

"I tell you he gets no change out of her—now."

"You are a beast, Tarp!"

"Oh, of course," said Tarp cheerfully.

"I don't know how much of this you mean, and how much is bluff. Of course you know Charlotte pretty well," he hesitated.

"Pretty well. Yes!"

"And I don't," said Tregillis, frankly. "I don't pretend to. She is a deuced sight too clever, and I suppose it's because you are clever too, that——"

"That what?" For the speaker had broken off with a restless movement.

"That perhaps you see what I don't. That you understand what bothers me. Still, I *can't* believe," and he rose and walked about, "at all events I don't see that she was to blame for the Brown affair. You know what Charlotte is like when she is in form? She simply billows over every girl she comes near. I don't know the Fitzarthurs, but from what you tell me I daresay Nelly Fitzarthur, whatever she may be in herself, fizzled away to nothing when it was a question between her and Charlotte."

"When the Charlotte rays were turned upon her," assented Tarp. "But the Charlotte rays have to be

worked, you know. They don't play harmlessly about of themselves."

"It would have been so beastly mean, I don't believe she could have done it."

"She *said* so. That doesn't make it true, of course ; still——"

"There you are again. First you are down on her for playing a shabby trick, then for pretending to do it when she didn't. It can't cut both ways," gloomily.

"I am inclined to think it can, George. My fair informant may have been perfectly correct in stating that she effected the separation, but I should not place implicit credence on the how or why she did so as reported by herself."

"Women are known to be inaccurate."

"They are," said Tarpy, gravely. "And never more so than when telling tales of themselves. 'Timeo Danaos,' with a new application."

Sir George took up a book from the table, and threw it down again.

"I don't know what you mean by that, Tarporley. I daresay it's very witty and amusing, but it's wasted on me. The only thing I know is that I admire Miss Sunning awfully, as I thought you did till now. Of course she is not the model miss of the pious story books, but why shouldn't a woman enjoy herself when she's young, as well as a man? A filly kicks up her heels in the paddock as well as a colt. Charlotte is a thousand times prettier, and cleverer, and all-round jollier than any one else I know. When I am with her I never wish to be anywhere else. I don't care who's singing, or dancing, or talking in the room—I don't care a damn what's going on. And when she leaves a house, the sooner I leave it the better I'm pleased. Isn't that good enough? And yet, when I get among you fellows afterwards, and hear

you talking, it makes me feel queer. I shouldn't like my wife to be spoken of like that. Once at the club, when you had been pulling Charlotte to pieces all round, I thought: 'They'll cry off after this. She'll be deserted to-night by half her friends,' but there wasn't one short. That made me see that it had been going on for longer than I knew—before I was, in fact. And—and I don't like it," with a sudden frown.

Tarpy responded by a curt nod, and a silent, meditative gaze. If he spoke now he would be indeed a fool.

"Of course, I had to do as you did," continued Tregillis, staring back at him; "I daresay you are saying to yourself that you can remember my laughing and chaffing with the rest—and even just now, when you and I sat down here to talk, we bandied Charlotte's name between us as if neither one nor other cared twopence what was said or who said it—but I'll tell the truth, I wanted to find out from the first if there were ever likely to be anything between you and her, or whether the field were open. You say it *is* open, and yet——" he paused.

Still Tarpy only looked, declining to speak.

"I know you are being straight with me," said Tregillis, earnestly. "You understand that, I hope? And if—if anything were to come off between Miss Sunning and me, I should trust you, Tarporley," his voice shook a little. "I should absolutely trust you. Her name would be sacred on your lips. It isn't *that* which——"

"Well?"

"Makes me feel so jolly uncomfortable," said Tregillis, relapsing into a natural tone accompanied by an odd, short little laugh. "Now, what is it? I am not at all sure that I want to marry Charlotte. I am not any more surer that she wants to marry me—but I hate to think it's an impossibility. When I'm in Town I don't

see myself marrying at all ; when I'm down at my own place, why, of course, it's not going to pass out of the strict line of succession—it's not going to those other Tregillises,—confound their impudence!—who have got their names into Debrett, rag-tag-and-bobtail ; though they have quite a decentish property of their own, and one would think they might be content with it. They imagine that, as I've waited so long, I'll go on waiting, and let my market pass. Look here, Tarpy, it's all very well for you ; you are half-a-dozen years younger than I ; and besides, if you were a hundred you could have your choice of girls directly you wanted an heir—but I'm not a swell, I'm only just passable ; and sometimes it comes upon me with a regular shock that I have been ten years now in possession and done nothing—nothing to cut out the James Tregillises. Why shouldn't I do that, and please myself at the same time ? That is if Miss Sunning would have me."

"I *could* give you a good reason ; one that perhaps even you would allow to be good, apart from everything I have already said," replied Lord Tarporley, "if you are putting this question in earnest, not merely because you are pig-headed."

"Well, I am. I may be pig-headed, but now that we have got to this point I am in earnest. I understand myself as I didn't before ; and I want to have it clear that what you have said is the worst you can say—I mean—confound my rotten way of putting it!—out with this reason of yours, and it shall have my best consideration, as we say on the bench. Hey ? Rather good that"—with an effort to resume ease and carelessness. "I learned that from my J.P. clerk, and it is quite my stock phrase. Well ?"

"At the present moment," said Lord Tarporley deliberately, "Charlotte, or 'Miss Sunning' I'll call her,

if you like it better—I observe *you* do when the glamour is upon you—stop, we'll say 'Our mutual friend' is pursuing one of her usual innocent and healthful recreations—of that we may both be absolutely certain, since she disdains our society. I say 'our' advisedly, George; for, by my instructions, your name was included in the list sent by my mother to our mutual friend's mother—and therefore, by the simple process of putting two and two together, even you must be convinced that you must possess your soul in patience. Ahem! My mother said that to me one day, and I thought it so sweet. I am afraid it was on account of her dear son that she was to possess *her* soul (by the way, how any one else could possess it must ever remain a mystery), but anyhow, patience, George, is the game you must play. Mrs. Sunning wrote on the Charles Street paper, but she is no more in Charles Street than you or I at this moment. Now, why did she think it worth while to write on that paper? Because she was told not to let people know where she was. And they are pretty cute, these ladies. They don't undo all by a postmark. They give their letters to some one to be posted in Town, d'ye see? It saves a post and all that. Now, who can that some one be, I wonder?" leaning back in his chair, and gazing upwards for inspiration.

"You said that about Drax Rotherham before," said Tregillis, surlily. "If *that* is all——"

"It is enough. Rotherham is more than enough. He began by being indifferent to Charlotte; he will end by being at her feet. Then, and then only," he paused, nodded and laughed, "you can come in, my boy."

"I am to wait till she has some one to jilt?" said Tregillis, in accents of restrained passion.

"Precisely. It would be your chance."

Tregillis rose slowly from his chair and looked about him, seeking something.

"What is it?" inquired his companion.

"A Bradshaw. Have you one handy? But I daresay you know your local trains. There is sure to be one early in the afternoon."

"For where? Where are you going?"

"To Town. To Charles Street. To Miss Sunning's address, directly I get it. To—to——"

Lord Tarporley, who had also risen, laid his hand on his friend's arm.

"To what, Tregillis? Tregillis, what do you mean by this? What has put this mad move into your head? When you first came into this room an hour ago, you had no more idea of proposing to Charlotte Sunning than I had; surely it cannot be because of anything that has passed between us——"

"But it is; it is because of everything. You have sneered and hinted; you have warned me—Good God! me, who am no better than my fellows, and which among us can cast a stone at the other?—against this bright and beautiful creature, whose only crime consists of winning all hearts. Why shouldn't she? Why should any man refuse to surrender? This Rotherham, I don't wonder that she felt chagrined; he mortified her openly before us all. And he is a nice fellow; Charlotte was quite right to look upon his holding out as an affront. I no more believe that she gave any further thought to him after we left Henley than you do yourself, still less do I believe that she has deliberately laid herself out to win him. Excuse my plain speaking—I didn't mind yours. And I appreciate your motives and all that. You think this marriage would be the ruin of me—(though why you should, I can't imagine)—but as you do you must, I suppose, be credited with considering it the part of a friend

to try to put me off by *any* means. I don't agree with you," said the sturdy Cornishman, straightening his back, "and that is what takes me up to Town this afternoon."

Without replying his host rang the bell.

"Will you give your own orders? I'll see you to the station. There is a good train in an hour's time, one of the best trains of the day."

"Thanks. That will suit me very well."

But even as he went upstairs, Tregillis experienced a vague sense of misgiving. He had up and spoken boldly out—but would it not have been better to have held his peace? He had hurled himself against a rock, which had opened and engulfed him in its recesses. Might he not as well have let the rock alone?

CHAPTER VI.

"I SHOULDN'T BE THE FIRST WOMAN TO EAT HER WORDS
ABOUT A MAN."

THERE could hardly have been a more bewitching summer bower than The Island Cottage—so called because of a willowy islet which intervened between the little backwater towards which the cottage lawn descended, and the broad current of the stream beyond.

Although surrounded by countless other habitations of its kind, so thick was the foliage on either side of the small garden, and so tall the willow bank which formed a screen in front—the only front worth speaking of—that perfect seclusion was assured either to occupants of the red-roofed verandah whose shade was constant and impenetrable, or to such as preferred the fresher air and flickering shadows of the elms below.

Basket-chairs and tables were grouped invitingly in both places; and in one or other Charlotte and her mother were usually to be found keeping each other company, so long as the sun was high in the heavens overhead.

Hitherto we have not presented these ladies in the ordinary routine of their daily life—it may be said that in London it had no ordinary routine, but was carried along on a furnace blast of excitement and publicity—but it must not be supposed that mother and daughter shrank into dull nonentities directly the blast ceased.

On the contrary, it was the consciousness of possessing

gifts and tastes compelled perforce to lie dormant amidst gayer scenes, crowded out by other interests, which made an occasional retirement from the world attractive to both, even sufficiently so to be sighed for by fits and starts amidst the turmoil of Mayfair.

There nothing could be done or thought of but the exigencies of each overcharged day and hour. "But if I give in to this scheme of Charlotte's," reflected Mrs. Sunning, when the 'If' was already *un fait accompli*, "I shall be able to complete that study of grey-green landscape I began but never finished on the banks of the Thames years ago. I always regretted having to leave it half done, for want of the proper foreground. August is the time of year for outdoor sketching; and with nothing else to do, and no one there——" her eyes glistened as she hurried to her paint-box.

She was an admirable artist, and now no day passed without producing fresh subjects for her brush, which, less certain of touch in its early efforts, strengthened with practice, and boldly attacked whatever came its way.

Charlotte, no mean critic, would put her finger on a weak spot where such existed.

"But I really did see it, Charlotte." The tower of a village church peeping through foliage has a reflection in the river foreground of a sketch where, to Charlotte's mind, no tower should be.

"Not where you have got it. It looks wrong; and it could not look wrong if it were right. Nature never looks wrong. Wash it out, it will never show," suggests she.

But this was ignorance.

"I would not have a washed-out drawing for the world," cries the indignant artist; "a muddle in water-colour is dreadful. Once there is a muddle——"

"And your drawings are always clean and clear, I must say that for them. Well, let us row up to the place, and you can see for yourself. It is all very good except that luckless tower," concedes Charlotte, whose praise is really valuable and much appreciated; and she pops a book for herself into the bow of the boat, and paddles away in excellent style the next morning, before the heat of the day begins.

Charlotte reads while her mother draws. She reads all sorts of books—occasionally very strange books. She does not mind how long she sits still, nor how silently her companion works, while hour after hour steals away.

It is Mrs. Sunning who wakes first from her absorption, for although she would fain go on for ever sharpening here and deepening there, she is not so young as she once was, and the cramped posture tells upon her after a time.

"I am afraid we must go now, Charlotte," she takes a long, lingering look at what she has done, and suddenly darts upon it with a fresh inspiration. "I am ready—quite ready," murmurs she, working away. Charlotte, to whom the scene is familiar, does not even turn her head.

By-and-bye, however, she shuts up her book with a brisk snap, and throws it on to the boat cushions. Ten minutes, twenty minutes have passed, and she has reached the end of a chapter.

"Do you like it?" inquires Mrs. Sunning, surveying her handiwork almost timidly. She has a true instinct, is never satisfied, always sees wherein she might have done better. But Charlotte, who has jumped up and is looking over her shoulder, on beholding the wonderfully life-like little 'bit,' pure in tone, perfect in touch, is betrayed into genuine enthusiasm.

"Let it alone; don't so much as look at it again, or you will spoil it;" and she throws away the dis-

coloured water from its jar, picks up the scattered débris of pencils, tubes and brushes—Mrs. Sunning would leave half of these behind her if it were not for Charlotte—and they are off in a trice downstream, hungry and cheerful, content with each other and the three hours of placid, peaceful enjoyment they have left behind them. Would you recognise the ladies of Mayfair?

Charlotte does not spend all her leisure in reading. She is an apt needlewoman, and a very fair musician in her own way. Her playing of the slow, throbbing movements of great compositions is worth hearing—she never attempts what is beyond her—but for her own ear, or perhaps for that of one other, she will draw much sweetness and not a little fire from lingering chords that haunt the memory. There is a piano at the cottage, and in the twilight its notes are often heard.

Five days of the week glide on in this calm, commonplace fashion; on the sixth, Mrs. Sunning wishes there were no sixth, nor yet a seventh; she could do very well without a Saturday and Sunday which bring an influx of visitors down upon the river—‘The River,’ as it is to Londoners—and one in particular to The Island Cottage.

Drax Rotherham never fails to appear about three o’clock on Saturday afternoons.

He was invited, as of course he knew she would have to invite him, for the very first ‘Week End’ after the ladies took possession of their new domain; and having behaved in an exemplary manner, been indeed a most agreeable guest, she made no demur, even inwardly, when the following ensued:—

“Mother, Mr. Rotherham is going; won’t you ask him to come next Saturday? He is chained to London for the present, and his people are away at the sea. I tell him you are a compassionate woman.”

Murmurs from Drax, who would like very well to come, but is not yet so infatuated as to be indifferent towards appearances.

Mrs. Sunning, however, rises gracefully to the occasion ; assures him that she has no one else to whom the spare room—there is but one—would be an accommodation ; and under such circumstances he promises readily enough to avail himself of her hospitality.

He tells himself, however, that he will provide against a repetition of the scene, and fully intends doing so during the ensuing week ; but the friends to whom he offers himself in the first instance cannot have him, and Charlotte laughs when he says he is going to Eastbourne.

"That is only one degree worse than stopping in Town," says she. "Have you pictured the horrors of it?"

"Horrors?" Drax smiles interrogatively. He had rather envied the little party setting forth for briny breezes and dancing waters, telling the boys to find out about the fishing before he came, and promising the sisters driving excursions and the like. It had not occurred to him to call these 'Horrors'.

"I went to Eastbourne once for my sins," continues the young lady, gaily ; "I had to go, there being nowhere else ; and it remains a hideous nightmare in my memory to this day. The awful people, and the noise ; the sham fashion, and the real vulgarity. The real vulgarity was the only thing I liked. I attended every nigger entertainment, and learnt the songs and dances. My mother said I should never go to 'that nasty place' again. She still puts down everything evil about me to the influence of that Eastbourne visit."

"I don't think my poor little sisters are likely to be contaminated," replies he, and is unable to repress a

gleam of mirth in his eyes at the idea of Addy or Evie performing a nigger *pas seul*, "they are very quiet."

"Not like me?" roguishly.

"They could not sing or dance if they tried, you know."

Charlotte takes a look at him, and changes her tack.

"I daresay they will enjoy it very much," she says, pleasantly, "and get no manner of harm from it either. I was a rowdy, obstreperous child—only a child, I assure you, at the time—and whatever I saw I wanted to imitate. You see I *could*," and she laughs complacently.

"I don't doubt you could, and to admiration;" his eyes rest for a moment on the pretty feet and ankles crossed in front, which rest upon the boat's cushions, as he pulls slowly along—for this conversation takes place during an evening paddle which the two are having by themselves, Mrs. Sunning having declined a second river outing that day. "I expect my people don't frequent the gay part of the place," continues Drax, sedately, "they were looking forward to country rambles."

"Were they? They will be disillusioned indeed. Country rambles! Have they ever been at Eastbourne?"

"No, nor to any of these places."

"I thought not," meaningly.

"I am afraid you are right," says Drax, resting on his oars for a moment to reflect. "Certainly Addy did write that it was not exactly what she had expected; she is too good a girl to complain, but——" and sundry confessions rise in his memory, and betray themselves by a doubtful intonation, which does not escape his companion's ear.

On the instant she responds to it.

"One does like to be quiet after the din of London.

Of course, your people don't live in London, that makes the difference; they are glad of a little amusement—but *you*——" she drops her hand into the water, and looks down at it, and after a long, thoughtful minute, up at him. "Don't go to Eastbourne, Mr. Rotherham; come here. Don't go to rest your addled brains and fretted nerves in a hot, noisy lodging, pursued by the clamour of the street into its farthest corner. You are a large party, and your sitting-room will have to be all table, with a view to meals—and oh, such meals!" she shuddered. "You know beforehand—long, long beforehand—from earliest dawn, what terrible dish you are to have for dinner; you are never allowed to forget either that it is coming, or that it is there, or has been there. When you wake next day, its ghost is still faintly whiffing about, till exorcised by a new phantom of the same species. There mingle with it gaseous odours which have gathered in the night; for even if you keep your own window open, every one else shuts his. My aunt was an invalid, like your father; we had to shut up for her sake if a shower of rain came on; and if it were a wet day, we were penned in—Heavens! I shudder to think of it," and she drew a deep breath of the pure, cool, evening air, and glanced around as if to point the contrast.

"You are certainly drawing a discouraging picture," said Drax, biting his lips. She was putting into words the very things he had been saying to himself during the bygone week. Eastbourne as an alluring prospect had been gradually growing dimmer and dimmer before his eyes, the charms of family society more and more dubious.

Once or twice he had caught himself wondering how little of it he could get off with, not to be unkind. His own holiday he would take abroad, but that was not

till September, and Addy had clung to him at the last with beseeching eyes which made later feelings seem treacherous, still—"I must own I don't look forward to it," he found himself saying at last.

So much allowed, the rest was easy.

"We are only to be here for six weeks in all," said Charlotte, "so it is not a very solemn undertaking to say you will give us the four Sundays that remain. It only amounts, when summed up, to a stay of four days—or, if you wish to be very exact and pile up the few extra hours, it still remains under a week. Who thinks anything of a week? I am sure my mother——"

"But she must have some others?"

"Ask her, if you don't believe me. We are here in hiding from our kind"—(he winced: 'Our kind'? Did that mean Drax Rotherham was not of their 'kind'? The phrase struck him)—"we could not have invited one without others," continued she, "and to tell the truth, there are some to whom we owe hospitality and don't intend to show it. We are a selfish couple, my mother and I—at least I am; my poor mother does what I tell her. She would have martyred herself, I doubt not, but she really required the rest and peace, so I took the matter into my own hands, and told nobody we had a house of our own. Our nearest relations don't know," gleefully; "and we send our letters, any particular ones, to London to be posted. That was why I asked you to take them up last week; and there are some more ready for you to-night." He was returning by the late train, finding that to wait till the following morning necessitated too early a start. "So now you have your fate in your hands," continued Miss Sunning, after a pause, during which suitable acknowledgements had been murmured to her companion, but nothing definite arrived at. "You may take me at my word; leave your portmanteau here

if you like ; and drop down regularly without considering each time a fresh visit. Or?——”

They looked at each other and smiled.

Nothing was said about reticence, but even in his next apologetic letter to Addy, Drax named no names. He had got a good house to go to, and, all things considered, hoped she would not think it very beastly of him if he decided to give up Eastbourne in preference for the nearer spot—“Quite in the country, too,” he added. Addy owned that Eastbourne was not ‘the country’; she wrote back earnestly anxious that he should do as he said ; so that, reading between the lines, he divined a confirmation of Charlotte’s words.

That, or something else, lightened his heart. All the week he walked about the burning pavements, or sat at his desk within a room which never cooled, or retired to the Sports Club, where he now put up, the Norwood villa being let for the time being—and a vision of the moment when he should step out upon a certain station platform, and turn up a little lane at whose close was a green gate, was ever present with him.

When he jumped into his hansom for Paddington, he called out the direction to the driver in the joyous accents of a schoolboy.

He grew to know by sight a number of his fellow-travellers, and would have talked with them but that conversation might lead to difficulties. Although Charlotte had not said in so many words ‘Hold your tongue about us,’ what else could have been meant by her elaborate explanation respecting her ‘kind’? *They* would tell each other ; he would tell nobody—he was discretion itself.

But he felt more than friendly towards the stout man with the huge hamper, the lean man with the golf

clubs, the couple of lads with their cricket-bags, who were never-failing passengers by his train.

Sometimes he met the latter on the river next day. They looked shyly the other way, being thus encountered; and when next met, would be communicative on cricket-field exploits, but not mention boating. Drax learned that they were barely nineteen, but had already begun their life work. Once he told Charlotte about them.

"I know who they are," said she, "their mother is a great friend of mine; rather a horrid sort of woman, who spends every penny she can lay her hands upon; and as the father does the same, of course there's nothing for the boys. I only hope she won't get to know I'm here," she broke off quickly.

"Not from me," said Drax.

"I wonder who it is they come down to?" continued Charlotte, ruminating. "They must have been left behind, while the gay and giddy parents gad."

But she did not offer to take pity on the youths as she had done on Drax, belated striplings not being in her line.

It was all very, very pleasant.

"And of course it will end here," reflected Mrs. Sunning, who felt she was being let off cheap on the whole. "Really it is a fortunate fancy of Charlotte's; it has saved both expense and trouble; and as for the waste of time, I am not sure that even *that* is not to the good. A girl who gives herself no rest gets to look old and fagged; whereas Charlotte will be quite freshened up by the autumn, when the country-house parties set in. She looks younger already. I feel younger myself. And all thanks to a little harmless flirtation," she wound up complacently.

"Don't let this friendship go too far, however," quoth

she one day, when, after a lingering farewell at the gate, Charlotte did not return to the house as was her wont, but remained outside, and could be seen, dimly outlined, a motionless figure on the river bank, till called from within, when the summons was hurriedly obeyed, and a hurried ‘Good-night’ obviously about to follow. “Charlotte, take care,” continued the speaker, laughingly. “What is sport to you, my love, remember the proverb;” but Charlotte knew it was not the proverb of which her mother was thinking. The proverb would not have made her look like that, and speak like that. She had never quoted a proverb when Gerry Brown and others were in the question. What was coming now?

“I am warning you because I feel it myself,” ran on Mrs. Sunning, with assumed ease—“the influence of this sweet spot and the life we lead. We women are so susceptible—that is, I mean,” perceiving her slip, “of course, I do not for a moment suppose that *you*—but naturally *he* may misinterpret any little *tendresse* of manner; and I thought, I fancied—a change——” she hesitated, uneasiness momentarily increasing.

“People are always fancying things,” replied Charlotte, quickly. “I told you long ago there was nothing, why do you start it all again? And, besides, it is nearly over now.”

“Nearly over? Yes. But not quite over. He comes next Saturday, I suppose; and—I really think you should beware. You are impulsive——”

“Impulsive? Oh dear, no.”

“There is something about you that men find irresistible. How often have you told me that it was not your fault when one after another——”

“What is all this about?” Suddenly Charlotte stepped out of the shadow and confronted her mother, presenting her full face for inspection. “You know as

well as I do that Drax Rotherham has fallen in love with me, and this is your way of hinting that you are in a terrible fright lest I should fall or have fallen in love with him. What if I have?"

Her full, red lips parted as she spoke, her nostrils dilated. Mrs. Sunning's heart died within her.

"What if I have?" repeated Charlotte, the words seeming to burst forth as the outcome of some internal struggle. "I shouldn't be the first woman to eat her words about a man. I shouldn't be the first who began in jest and ended in earnest."

"Ended! You poor, foolish child."

"Child!" A low, hard laugh. "There's not much of the child about me, would God there were a little more!" cried Charlotte, with sudden passionate energy. "If I ever had been a child, or could be, I shouldn't have done this thing for which I loathe myself. Entrapped, beguiled——"

"My dear! my dear! Think what you are saying," pursued Mrs. Sunning, in accents of remonstrance, "do not use such words. They sound too shocking; and simply because of a little harmless flirtation—oh, but it *is* so—do you suppose that I, your mother, would have permitted anything more? But I was afraid of this all along. And had you not given me your word in Charles Street——"

"My word for what? Tell me what I said that I may unsay it—if I choose. I don't care for my word;" her eyes flashing scorn, defiance, a thousand things.

"You—you don't care for your word?" The weaker vessel shrank a little before the blast; Charlotte, towering up to her full height, was inches taller than her mother, and in moments like these every inch told—but temper coming to her aid: "Then you are a very wicked girl," cried the latter. "What *do* you care for, if not for

your solemn word of honour? And now you dare to stand up and tell me that I, who trusted it, have been deceived into letting myself play into your hands. And that this wretched man——”

“Not a word against him. You may say what you like of me. Drax Rotherham has done no wrong.”

“All very fine,” sneered Mrs. Sunning, who was, in truth, beside herself with vexation and alarm. “Then what I say of you is, that you have behaved abominably, that you are shameless, heartless——”

“Not heartless,” muttered Charlotte, beneath her breath, a faint involuntary movement of the head accentuating the words. “Not heartless,” she repeated in a whisper too soft for utterance.

“What? What is that you say?” demanded her mother, sharply.

“I objected to one of your adjectives”——Charlotte herself again on the instant——“it did not seem to me accurate.”

“Accurate! You drive one wild! I believe you are trying to do it—to goad me into a passion that you may make your own terms. Charlotte, you know I have not your strength and spirits; I am not young, and my nerves,” putting her hand to her brow, “have been sorely tried in the past. I did think that for a time at least I was to have peace and quiet. Perhaps I was too unsuspicious, but you should not have taken a cruel advantage——”

“Stop!” said Charlotte, who had awaited this moment, “it is for *me* to say that *you* should not take a cruel advantage. Tears and plaintiveness are old allies, but it is hardly fair to press them into the service on the present occasion. I am an undutiful daughter, if you please, but I should like to have the part of dutiful daughter defined to me. Is it to secure the husband on whom

the mother has set her heart, or to refuse the lover on whom she has set her own?"

"The lover? Has this Rotherham declared himself your lover?"

"I might refuse to answer that," said Charlotte, calmly, "but I shall not. No, he has not declared himself. But I expect he will—next time."

Mrs. Sunning breathed a sigh of relief.

"That pleases you," said Charlotte, eyeing her. "You think the blow may be averted yet. Well," slowly, "it may."

"Charlotte, you might, you must listen to me. I will not say because I am your mother, I will talk to you as an equal, a friend, the person who knows you best in the world, and—and loves you," she paused, she would not harp upon this string, yet possibly it was the faint, almost imperceptible, tremulousness in the final accents which produced the desired rejoinder.

"I will listen," said Charlotte.

"Think of what your life is, and of what you wish it to be," proceeded her mother, rapidly. "Think of all you would have to forego, of the complete alteration in your habits, of the absolutely different world you would have to move in. At the present moment, because your fancy has been caught, and you are young and impressionable—you may say you are not, but you *are*, and you cannot deny that once or twice before——"

An impetuous movement.

"Yes, yes, I know, I understand; but I must remind you. However, let that be, and think only of the future. How dearly you might have to pay for the gratification of a passing desire you cannot but know. Say you engage yourself to Drax Rotherham—possibly you do not even contemplate marriage——"

"If I engage myself, I do contemplate marriage."

"A hasty, ill-judged, miserable marriage!"

"For which of us? Or both?"

"For both; certainly for both; I can hardly say which would be the more unhappy of the two. You, condemned to sink to the level of his commonplace existence, engulfed by his second-rate relations, withdrawn from your proper sphere, your very name forgotten by those who now crowd around you—dull, moping, regretting, and possibly blaming me."

"*That* I should never do."

"You think you would be too proud; but suppose you were, what good would that do you? My poor child, you would only fret the more. And a disappointed, fretted woman, who feels that she has lowered herself by her union with a man beneath her, is hardly likely to be a desirable wife, or even to retain a hold on her husband's affections. Mr. Rotherham is domestically inclined; he is the centre of an adoring home circle; it would be a disagreeable surprise to him and to them to find that you missed the society of other men, and their little attentions—and, Charlotte, I don't fancy Drax Rotherham is a man to stand tamely by if you did *not* consent to sacrifice these——"

"You mean that I should want to flirt, and he would be jealous."

"Precisely—if you choose to put it so. You cannot do without admiration; I do not mean the general admiration which every pretty woman covets, but the——"

"Call it the subjugation of the individual."

"That is what I mean. You must have men about you, men of your own sort. If you marry one of these, one, we will say, who understands your position in society and your attitude towards it, there would be no trouble. You would never overstep bounds; and he on his part

would not be exacting and ridiculous. Hitherto you have been so reasonable, Charlotte, that except for those foolish little episodes when you were scarcely grown up, I have always felt that there was no occasion for me to lay before you the consequences of an unfortunate love affair; but now my conscience——”

“The less we say about conscience, either yours or mine, the better, don’t you think? It strikes me that your conscience, *ma mère*, must be laughing in her sleeve.” There was a stinging sarcasm beneath the lightly uttered words, and Mrs. Sunning’s flushed cheeks took momentarily a deeper stain.

“I told you I should speak as an equal, not as a parent,” faltered she. “You would not have listened if I had addressed myself to your sense of the—the Scriptural prohibition—you know that in some of the Gospels, or is it the Epistles?—I know I have heard it somewhere, that two ought not to walk together except they be agreed, and Alban once preached most beautifully on that very subject. I cannot quite remember how he took it, but I am sure his point was that husband and wife should be in sympathy as to what they cared most about.”

“And you do not think me capable of bringing myself into sympathy with—with any one I cared enough for to marry?”

“I do not,” said Mrs. Sunning, firmly.

“I am rather inclined to agree with you,” said Charlotte, suddenly kissing her and leaving the room so quickly that it almost seemed she fled.

For a few minutes her step was heard moving rapidly about overhead, then it ceased, and silence reigned throughout the house.

“Well, I have done my duty,” ejaculated the widow, who had had a tough fight of it, and emerged by no means scatheless; “it had to come, and good Heavens!

if I had delayed I might have spoken too late. It makes me hot and cold to think of such a thing. She is bitter and unfair,” a sense of injury stealing into her bosom; “she always insists upon it that I am not a religious woman, which is very unjust. I do not see that it need be put upon *that* because I have always refrained, and refrained most particularly on this occasion, from arguing with her from any point of view she would not understand. I was not speaking of my own feelings; and she would simply have jeered if I had not confined myself to the real, practical stake at issue. Charlotte does love the world—the Bible forbids it of course—but as it *is* so, and she would be miserable if she had not rank, and money, and all the rest, it is surely my duty as her sole remaining parent to guard against her regretting all her after life the advantages she might have had by securing the right man. He need not be a bad man,” uneasily. “I could tell by Charlotte’s eye what she was thinking of just now. She was mentally accusing me of being willing to throw her into the arms of any eligible *parti*, be his character what it might. Most unjust. I only say, men will be men. If they are willing to marry and settle down, we have no right to pry into their past lives, nor to suppose they will not make perfectly respectable husbands. But as for this Drax Rotherham, I daresay he is no better in reality than Lord Tarporley or any other of Charlotte’s admirers; yet, just because she has taken it into her head that he is—or else because he is good-looking—no, I firmly believe it is more because he gave her some trouble at the outset than for any other reason; she is blind, or pretends to be blind, to the horrible incongruity of such a match.”

A pause.

“She would be utterly thrown away;” suddenly the mask was off, and Mrs. Sunning’s countenance took a

keen, cunning expression. "Her looks, her wit, her catching air, her great success—greater this season than ever—it makes me mad when I think of it. Fatę cannot, cannot be so cruel. . . ." She clasped her hands, then flung them apart despairingly. "But what folly to say this, when every day we see it done. There was Lady Sophimore and her Geraldine—Geraldine for whom a duke was scarcely good enough!—and Beatrice Saxoby; I did feel for the Saxobys, they were never spiteful about Charlotte as the Sophimores were; and there were both the Wilton girls. It makes me sick to think of how many there were; though, to be sure, Charlotte—it would kill me if I had to announce this as the end of Charlotte. She *must* repay me for all I have spent upon her. The house alone—and if I should have to tell Henrietta and all of them that the man came out of a suburban villa! Charlotte *shall* not dig out this earthworm; she cannot be *allowed* to do it. Oh, why was I so weak as to give way about coming here?" suddenly the accents of excited vehemence sank to a wail. "If only I had taken the opportunity she offered me to break off the negotiations, and go as usual among our own people! I had the option; and if she had not thrown dust in my eyes by pretending that she would be satisfied with a little idle philandering, I should never have run my head into this noose."

Lamentations being unavailable, however, a new train of thought presently ensued. Could Drax Rotherham be prevented coming again to the cottage? With Charlotte's co-operation nothing more easy—without it—? Mrs. Sunning fell asleep with the problem of 'Without it?' unsolved.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT CHARLOTTE HAD TO FEAR.

SHE couldn't.

That was the first final decision, but, like many other positively last appearances, there were plenty more to follow.

The night was soft and still ; from Charlotte's window she could hear at short intervals echoes of passing oarsmen beyond the islet—for even at that hour there were boats out, and the little wharf hard by was busy—but to an ear accustomed to the ceaseless roll of Piccadilly, there was such an absence of all near and dominant sounds as passed for silence.

Charlotte hastily disrobed herself, threw a light wrapper over her shoulders, and leaned across the sill.

She wanted to think. She often thought. There were days when she did nothing else.

And it was no new thing with her to contemplate, as she did now, what an absolute and irrevocable renunciation of her present life would be like.

To subdue or modify it she held to be impracticable. It had a hold on her which could never be loosened, a power over her which could never be weakened. That hold, that power, must be broken on the wheel, or nothing.

Charlotte studied herself mentally as she did physically, and had early decided what she had to hope or fear from the component points of her character. All

that she had done hitherto was of absurdly small account—but how about establishing a foothold upon those dizzy heights where congregate the eagles of mankind? If she only had a chance!

And at one time she had fancied she had a chance!

A year or two before her ambition had been boundless, she had dreamed the world at her feet, and heard her name ringing through the spheres. Nothing then was good enough for her, no glory too great for her.

Looking back now she could perceive that this phase had passed; and that it had been succeeded by a triumphal progress on a lower level, more easily obtainable, and satisfactory enough *pro tem.*—since, albeit Pride had given place to Pleasure, there had always been the latent idea that she could, an she chose, return to Pride.

But time was passing, and with all that life had hitherto brought her, she wanted more. Why had she not something to bring out the whole forces of her being and show of what stuff she was made? “People will not take me seriously,” she complained.

And Charlotte’s mother annoyed her. Of late Mrs. Sunning had betrayed maternal intentions and desires more plainly than she was aware of, and Charlotte knew that whatever arguments might be supposed to carry weight with herself, the speaker was saying in her heart, “Marry money—and you will be off my hands. Marry decently—and my friends will envy me. Marry creditably—and may my tongue perish if ever it ceases to boast of such a daughter.”

Afterwards—it would matter not how soon afterwards—the days of darkness might come; but what though the cup were bitter, it would have to be drunk, and the parent would be indifferent with the indifference of content. This, as we say, provoked Charlotte.

It argued her nothing in herself; and the consciousness that she was expected to sink into a mere everyday dresser and entertainer made her feel undervalued and ill-used. Who could not dress and dine, drive and dance?

"But, my dearest child," began the fond mother one day.

"Oh, cut that!" cried Charlotte, sharply. It roused the worst feelings of her nature to be called a 'child'.

Another thing she realised was that she was hardening. The season just over had seen her more reckless and lawless than former ones had done. True, she had established her empire; learned to be more wary, and subtle, and successful, than in less experienced days; but she felt—older.

And she looked it—looked the ripe, mature woman; there were dawns after nights of revelry when she told herself she could see crows'-feet in the glass.

What about rival beauties? Every spring produced its crop, fresh from the mint; soon these would begin to arch their eyebrows and curl their lips if Charlotte Sunning's name were mentioned. Hateful, horrible idea!

Of course she might win them over as she did her contemporaries of the present time—it was her boast that she numbered among her admirers many of her own sex; but not to excite jealousy and awe, there would be a sting in that.

To sum up, Charlotte had a lurking suspicion, more worrying than all the rest, that she was not believed in except by one solitary individual. Of all who flattered, courted, and hung about her, Drax Rotherham alone took her as she would fain be taken. Others laughed at her wit, applauded her prowess, and raved about her beauty—she could, or thought she could, make them

excuse and permit everything she chose to do—he alone saw nothing that required tolerance. How about beginning life again from this standpoint?

No doubt it would be a strain, but she was in the mood to court a strain. It would be necessary to check and curtail herself, not always, but often; and that ‘often’ meant when she was at her best according to Lord Tarpoley and her other friends.

If she married Rotherham, she would have to lead his life, however it might be modified and adopted to suit her requirements. “I should insist upon *some* things,” she murmured; but even as the thought arose she shook her head. Of what avail were ‘some things’? The dweller in the valley may erect here and there a mound, or a series of mounds, but to stand on them only serves to afford glimpses of the mountain-peaks above. Charlotte had a vast amount of common-sense.

With the man himself she had no fault to find. He had been a little too slow to start, but he was now well aflame, and if only he were alone in the world! “Or if I could give out that he had fifty thousand a year,” sighed she, “that would cover the family and any multitude of sins;” as it was, her head drooped. All her life she had been afraid of this moment which had come upon her.

For she liked Drax; liked him better than she dared think about; and if he would have been satisfied with an engagement—a secret engagement—all would have been easy. She would then have had time to consider and decide. The vexatious part was that with all her power over him she did not for a moment deceive herself on this head.

Had he been a younger man, or one more desperately enamoured, a pretext might have been devised; but he was only a reasonable being, cheerfully in love, to whom

a whisper of "Let us keep this joy to ourselves: to bruit it abroad would be to rub off its bloom"—with variations, would savour of the ridiculous. "It must be neck or nothing," she again muttered half-aloud, and shook with impatient and impotent indecision.

Of course her mother was dead against the match; that was only natural.

"Then let her marry again herself," cried Charlotte, wearied after a fresh and prolonged struggle. "No doubt somebody could be found who would do. And Drax would be a great deal more civil to her than the sons-in-law she is so anxious for. She herself complains that Tarpie slights her. George Tregillis dislikes her. And poor Gerry is frightened to death of her. Somehow my men don't take to my mother."

Drax Rotherham, however, had seen in Mrs. Sunning not the perfunctory appendage of her own drawing-room, but the obliging friend and hostess to whom he owed much of his present happiness; and Charlotte, to do her justice, liked him the better for this, and watched the cushions being arranged for the elder lady's support in the boat, or her camp-stool being set beneath a tree, with the utmost gravity and circumspectness.

And she never attempted to open Drax's eyes, nor made any of those little caustic remarks at Mrs. Sunning's expense, which elicited smirks and knowing looks from her other admirers, who thought it the best fun in the world to set the two women by the ears, and were even won to applaud the elder if she made a hit. Charlotte divined that Rotherham would not find the scene amusing.

"I think you are horribly ungrateful," she once turned upon her parent after he had taken his departure. "Another man would find you in the way; you never were half so well treated before."

As she spoke, her eye followed the retreating figure with an expression Mrs. Sunning did not like.

Indeed Charlotte had been strangely gentle and silent that evening. She had seen the light leap to her lover's eyes when left alone with her, and had hurriedly cut short the *tête-à-tête*, finding a reason for not remaining longer outside in the dewy dusk, after Mrs. Sunning had retired within, as was her wont.

Heretofore this evening solitude had been Charlotte's best time; but now as she rose Drax rose also, with a humble submissiveness to her will in all things, which argued a novice in the courts of Cupid.

She half-expected he would lay hold on her to detain her, but he did not, nor thought of such a thing. From that moment she felt she must have him.

Have him? Yes, but there are ways and ways of 'having'. Should she let the proposal come and reject it? No doubt, if she could trust herself, that would be the thing to do. If she could only trust herself! But she debated, and came to the conclusion it was not to be risked.

The clock of a church close by struck twelve, and Charlotte drew in her head from the window.

When she came down to breakfast next morning, there were two letters in her hand which had not come by the post, and at which Mrs. Sunning cast only a single glance, making no remark.

Neither did she commit the error of which a less acute observer might have been guilty; there was no increase of tenderness or solicitude in her manner, and Charlotte might fancy if she chose that her mother perceived nothing unusual in the unwonted pallor of her cheeks and listlessness of her step.

She had had a hot, restless, wretched night. As a fact, the elements were partially to blame for tossings to

and fro and feverish inability to sleep, since heavy thunder-clouds hung about, and the motionless air was sultry in the extreme; so that betwixt body and mind my unfortunate heroine was now in a state to explode at a touch. Her mother with consummate skill contrived to evade that touch.

"Nothing tastes good this morning," murmured she, setting down her cup with a sigh, half-real, half-assumed. "It is the weather, I suppose. There is no air to be had in a low-lying spot like this."

"There would be no air anywhere to-day," said Charlotte.

A pause ensued. Mrs. Sunning rose and looked out.

"It would even be hot on the river," she murmured.

No response.

"Charlotte, do you think this place suits us? I am wondering——" again the speaker paused and appeared to meditate.

"Well?" said Charlotte.

"Whether—— Of course, if you wish it, we will stay on; it is only for another week—but still, if it is going to be like this, a few more such nights as last night—really I don't know that it is good enough."

"You mean that you would like to be off?"

"What do you think? We should have to pay the rent all the same; they would not let us off that."

"Of course not. We couldn't expect it."

"But if it makes us both ill?"

"I am not ill," said Charlotte, gloomily. "I am only sick to death of everything—but if you want to go"—for this was precisely what she desired and intended, only it might as well come from her mother's lips—"I don't mind," she concluded, leaning her elbows on the table, and looking vacantly at the wall in front.

"How soon?" To herself Mrs. Sunning appended,

"The sooner the better," but it was not her cue to seem in a hurry.

"As soon as you please. To-morrow, if you like."

"To-morrow?" Still there was no reference to the freshly-written letters, nor yet to the battle which had preceded them. "To-morrow?" reflected the widow, thoughtfully. "But you always do like sudden moves, Charlotte; and if we are to go, I daresay there is nothing to prevent—we have all to-day to pack and settle up—yes, I can see no reason why we should not manage it. We go home, I suppose?" tentatively.

Charlotte motioned assent.

"And we can make further plans when we get there," proceeded her mother, briskly. "It is a comfort to have one's own house to go to; and London cannot be worse than it is here; indeed I have always heard that it is quite nice there in September—but of course we should only stop for a day or two, and I should be ready to go on whenever you choose, and——"

"Wherever I choose—so long as it takes me away from Drax Rotherham," said Charlotte, with a bitter smile. "So be it. The planet drew a little too near the sun last night, so now it must be thrust back into its proper orbit, and that can be most easily done by the sun's disappearing from the heavens for a space. Mother, you are saying to yourself now that you have saved me from a terrible *mésalliance*. I suppose you have. I think if I had another kind of mother I should perhaps have let—the planet—touch——"

"And repented all your life afterwards. My poor dear, I know. I feel for you"—but triumph sparkled in her eyes despite the words, and Charlotte threw off the touch of sympathetic fingers.

"Never mind about feeling; you have conquered, and that ought to be enough. It was touch and go, too," a

slow, dry smile wreathing her lip. "I was in the humour for any folly last night, and," checking with a glance the joyful exclamation she saw about to burst forth, "I am not altogether sane yet. Don't talk of it. Don't make me hate myself more than I do already. If you agree to keep off the subject, we can go out as usual this morning."

"My love, I must make arrangements; I don't know that I can."

"Then I will go by myself." She paused at the door and looked round. "You need not write to Charles Street; this," holding up one of the epistles in her hand, "is to tell them to expect us. Oh, you need not look astonished. I knew you would want to go, as I did. The other," Mrs. Sunning listened intently, "is to tell a lie to the only friend I have in the world who believes I speak the truth."

"What have you said to him, Charlotte?"

"The old thing; that you are unwell and that we are obliged to go to Town to see your doctor."

"But he will come to us there."

"We shall only be passing through."

"You have broken with him entirely?" said Mrs. Sunning, conscious of imprudence, but unable to refrain from the enquiry. "You have; I see it in your look. Charlotte, you will never regret this—oh, I *must* say it—I must give you courage and resolution——"

"To go to the devil! I did not know *that* was ever needed. It is the other thing that demands courage. I am not now in love with Drax Rotherham, but I think I could be if I had courage to face the world's opinion."

"You are not even in love with him? Then what——"

"I said I could be," with a frown. "Take care, or I shall be. It is enough that you have put before me,

and I before myself, so—so—what shall I say?—so unblushingly the price I should have to pay for my toy, that I cannot afford to handle it any longer. Once before we debated the question, mother, and I saw danger ahead; but it seemed then a shadowy kind of danger, hardly worth troubling about, now——” she stopped, and to her own and her mother’s infinite surprise her eyes filled with tears. “You see we had better go,” she whispered, and stepped without to escape further parley.

Fate, however, had no intention of playing into the young lady’s hands so easily.

On returning from a solitary morning spent beneath the willow bank of a sequestered backwater, Charlotte perceived, from some little distance, a figure impatiently beckoning to her from the landing-stage; and as she did not quicken her stroke, for she was not minded to hasten for anybody, and rather resented the suggestion of doing so, Kitchin, her mother’s maid, whose attitude breathed importance and excitement, added her voice in a weak, shrill note designed for ‘Hoy!’

To hear Kitchin call “Hoy!” was so comical, that Charlotte, despite her ill-humour, laughed.

Should she pretend not to hear and shoot up the outer edge of the islet, instead of turning the boat’s head homewards? She felt half-disposed to do so.

“Hoy! Hoy!” came again from the bank. Kitchin was now running along as far as she could go, in desperation.

Some one has turned up,” reflected Charlotte. “Can it be *he*?”

Her own heart beat a little, and she stopped rowing altogether, but still with her back to Kitchin. For the sake of a moment’s breathing space, she bent down, affecting to busy herself with something at the bottom of the boat.

A renewal of shouts and gesticulations.

"She'll rouse the whole neighbourhood if she goes on," muttered Charlotte, still faintly amused by the maid's antics; and at last she allowed herself to nod recognition, and paddle towards the landing-stage.

"Oh, miss, we couldn't tell where to find you, and John has been all over the village——"

"Though you knew I had gone on the river!"

"He was to get a boat, and go after you, miss. He has been gone an hour or more——"

"Good gracious! What for? Why don't you tell me, now I'm here? Such a fuss!" muttered Charlotte, not displeased to show herself cool and contemptuous supposing——

"The doctor says," gasped Kitchin, whose breath, never much at command on account of tight lacing, had gone entirely in her series of 'Hoys!'—"we wasn't to alarm you, miss, but we was to fetch you as quick as we could."

"The doctor' says?" repeated Charlotte, her voice and look changing. "Here! Catch hold!" rapidly bringing the boat alongside, and springing ashore.

"What's happened? Is it my mother?"

"Missis was coming out of the post-office, and looking the other way, and one of them nasty little butcher boys, as drives like demons and never looks before them nor yet behind them, sends the pole of his cart right at her, and she's down among the horses' feet——"

"Not *killed*, Kitchin?" With a start and a blanched face Charlotte stops short where she stands, but the voluble Kitchin, who had rather hoped and worked up for this, being satisfied, is merciful.

"Oh no, miss. Only badly hurt, and——"

"How long ago? How soon was the doctor with her? Is she—is she," looking up at the windows, as though

to glean information from them, as she hurried forward again.

"It was before twelve, miss, I know; for we heard the church clock go as we was bringing her in."

"Was she conscious? My poor mother!" There was genuine affection and distress in the accents.

Before Kitchin could reply, however, a black-coated figure stepped out into the verandah, and the village doctor, who had seen the arrival from an upper window, advanced with a bow at once sympathetic and respectful. He knew Miss Sunning well by sight. He had never hoped for the luck of knowing her otherwise.

Charlotte looked at him—it was not in her to resist looking at a man—before she spoke. Her brief "How is she?" followed indeed at once—well said—honestly felt—but she knew exactly what Dr. Jocelyn was like ere she put the question.

"Mrs. Sunning is a good deal bruised and shaken, but otherwise, so far as I can be certain of at present, she has sustained no injury," replied the young man, in a voice that was worth half his income to him. Every one knew Jocelyn's wonderful voice, and its sick-room power. He never raised it. He expected it always to be obeyed.

Kitchin, now reduced to her proper proportions, shrank to insignificance on the instant.

"They frightened me terribly," murmured Charlotte, not even allowing the alarmist her own individuality; "servants love to frighten," as she moved out of earshot. "I am so thankful—but still it must have been a terrible accident."

He owned that there had been a wonderful escape, indeed, a more wonderful escape he had seldom met with. From the account given him before he saw the patient he had fully expected to find a much more serious state of things.

"Yes, I am sure I—I thought the worst," cried she, incoherently.

"It was difficult at first to ascertain the precise amount of the injury inflicted," proceeded Dr. Jocelyn, "but I have made as strict an investigation as possible at present, and I think I am in a position to say confidently that no bone is broken. The system has received a shock; and Mrs. Sunning will have to be kept very quiet—absolutely quiet for a day or two—but beyond that I see no cause for anxiety."

"Has she asked for me?"

"No doubt—before I came. Naturally we have been talking of herself since."

"Shall I go to her?"

"There would be no objection to your doing so, only," he paused, "she is trying to sleep. I have given her a composing draught. Unless you especially desire it——"

"Oh, I can wait," said Charlotte. Now that she knew her mother was in no danger, she preferred to wait. She sat down in the verandah, and Dr. Jocelyn sat down beside her.

"So you have got a new man," observed Mrs. Sunning, sarcastically, a few days after this. "I might have guessed you would. Charlotte, you are insatiable."

"What nonsense!" Charlotte, who was standing smiling by her mother's bed, lifted off it a tray with an empty cup, and spoke again. "You think he is *your* doctor, don't you? and that I have no right to him, not to ever so little a bit of him?"

"I think that when he comes to see *me*, it is odd for him to give me only ten minutes, and you very nearly an hour of his time."

"You are his business, I am his recreation."

Mrs. Sunning laughed. She was not ill-pleased with

the turn affairs had taken. Considering the nature of the accident, its effects had been marvellously slight, and she was recovering with an elasticity due to a naturally robust constitution and healthy habits; with all her love of gaiety and amusement she had always been careful of overstrain, and her life hitherto had been an easy one.

"You are a good subject for an accident, and a famous advertisement for Dr. Jocelyn," continued Charlotte, lightly. "He cannot extol you enough. And I am sure you have made quite a sensation in the place, if that is any consolation to you. Besides, you certainly timed it well, my dear; it came in most handy, if you will permit me to say so." This, as she knew, was just what her mother was thinking.

"Certainly it saved us some trouble, Charlotte."

"And by being a little vague as to dates, we have got off the visits in fine style. Aunt Hen's letter of inquiry, coming in the very day after, did splendidly. Now none of them will be able to think they caught us tripping."

"What did you say to them?"

"Oh, I wrote beautifully. I opened their eyes, and poor, dear Henny-Penny will be quite ashamed of her coolness, and send me a tremender by return of post. I said I put off writing till you were quite out of danger."

"I never was in danger, Charlotte."

"You had a miraculous escape—Dr. Jocelyn's own words, and that's good enough."

"It was almost a pity I had posted Mr. Rotherham's letter," murmured Mrs. Sunning, who had her own reasons for wishing to know what Charlotte thought of this. "A telegram would have sufficed—only," she paused, scanning her daughter's face, "of course it might

have brought him down here by the next train to see if he could be of any service. Perhaps——”

“Perhaps we had better let Mr. Rotherham's name alone,” said Charlotte, in a hard, composed voice. “We settled about him before this began.”

“Oh yes, my love ; yes,” hurriedly.

“I am trying to forget him ; let me. You know how I felt. If I begin to feel the same again it would be a pity. As long as I can keep him out of sight—no, he is not altogether out of mind,” swiftly arresting the obvious rejoinder, “but the mind can be managed.”

She drew a breath and continued. “For which reason I cultivate Jocelyn. Joss is a soporific. I was badly in need of a soporific on the morning that a kind Providence threw him in my way. He is very good to me. He is so sorry for me that he sits, and looks, and longs to comfort the distressed damsel. What luck for me that you had not a little, fat pill-box of a doctor, mother ; I should have been reduced to imploring you to have in a he-nurse.”

“Jocelyn is rather a charming man,” said Mrs. Sunning, plaintively. Realising as she did the value of such an ally at this crisis, it was yet a little hard that he should hurry down from her elegantly set-out bed-chamber, with its flowers and shaded blinds, and her pathetic self as a centre-piece, to make his report to Charlotte sitting on the lawn—not at all an anxious Charlotte, nor likely to make the said report an engrossing topic of conversation.

From her bed, which was across the window, and tolerably close to it, the room being small, the patient could look out by raising herself upon her elbows—and this Mrs. Sunning invariably did directly the doctor shut
or.

heard him run downstairs—(in the cottage every

sound was audible)—and then there would be a pause of ten seconds or so while Charlotte steadily read on beneath the trees—but her mother learned to know the exact moment at which she would lift her head, close the book, and come forward with her finger on the page.

Jocelyn would be half across the lawn by this time, his tall figure ("So very well dressed, too!" she commented) seen to every advantage in the morning sunshine; the two would meet and stand for exchange of greetings, and she could fancy Charlotte's decorous "How do you find my mother to-day?"—but after, long, long after the easy inquiry must have been disposed of, voices would be heard, voices and little bursts of laughter—and from her bed she would feel inclined to cry out "Charlotte, I want you!" or "Please ask Dr. Jocelyn to step upstairs again,"—or anything to cut short the merry duologue.

When Jocelyn was bending over her bed, so serious, so tender, so sympathetic, she thought him the very model of a doctor; the low, sweet tones of his voice made an order for the most nauseous physic palatable, and the strong yet gentle clasp of his hand imparted a glow to her feeble fingers—but decidedly he was not so nice out of the sick-room.

"A doctor should never be seen except by his patients," muttered she, with asperity. "I daresay he is quite noisy and vulgar down there, led on by Charlotte."

"I thought he would never go!"

Charlotte had come indoors at last, and appeared with a satisfied, unconscious face at her mother's bedside.

"I wanted particularly to hear what he said," continued Mrs. Sunning, in querulous accents of rebuke, "and you might have known I should be waiting and fretting myself. I do think you might have come sooner."

"Fretting yourself? What about? There is nothing to fret about." Charlotte mildly surprised. Not only was the patient's progress in every way satisfactory, but the doctor had owned with a decent suppression of reluctance that there was no further occasion for Mrs. Sunning to remain confined to her room.

"You are to come down after luncheon," said Charlotte.

. "That he told me himself. But surely he was saying more to you? I looked out once or twice, and he was talking so intensely that—tell me at once, Charlotte, if I have anything to dread? It only agitates me, the idea of concealment. If I knew the worst——"

"You poor thing! He was never talking about you at all!"

"Not about me?" Yet she knew it, or at least had felt sure of it all along. It was from her mother that Charlotte inherited her powers of acting. "Dear, how much I might have been spared!" exclaimed the widow, falling back upon her pillows. "And you, Charlotte, did you never think of this?" continued she, reproachfully. "If you had been snatched from the jaws of death——"

"I am really very sorry, mum; I had no idea you took it like that. You seemed quite content with yourself up till now; and I couldn't suppose—I didn't mean to be cruel to you."

"Well, well; it got on my nerves perhaps. Lying here and worrying over plans——"

"As to them it is all right. We can do what we like next week, at least by the end of the week. He does not recommend your being moved before Friday or Saturday."

"Nor then, I suppose?" Mrs. Sunning looked keenly at the speaker's face. "A doctor is naturally loath to

relinquish a patient, especially when the patient has a pretty daughter who is willing to amuse herself with his society, and does not mind how long he stays, nor how many other poor creatures are waiting for him."

"Seems to take it easy, doesn't he? But I fancy none of his other 'poor creatures' are interesting just now."

"He finds the well people more interesting than the sick, I daresay. However, he won't be able to pay such unconscionable visits now that I shall be downstairs. What letters have you?" abruptly changing the subject. "I heard the postman's knock. Any from——" glancing at the packet in Charlotte's hand.

She half expected one from Rotherham, being ignorant of the terms in which he had been dismissed; but Drax never thought of writing, he understood but too well all that was conveyed by the brief note worded more plainly than need have been, because the writer durst not trust her resolution—and from the first glance he never doubted its intent.

That the blow was unexpected and its shock considerable he could not deny to himself. Not that he had been altogether happy in his love or hopes; sometimes he had even experienced a vague, tremulous sense of being carried off his feet into wild waters which surged and swirled around him; sometimes he had gone away from The Island Cottage looking this way and that with a curious tingling of the veins, expecting—expecting—he knew not what, but conscious of something unreal, unnatural in his being where he was, and what he was.

He was not in a position to marry, at least to marry such a girl as Charlotte. Before he came across her, he had never dreamed of sighing at the feet of any fair one—prosaically speaking, he had no turn for the part, and considered this as well, since it would be a year or

two, at any rate, before any change in his present position was likely, and even then his future might not be assured.

It might, or it might not. He was very well as he was, and had confidence in the seniors of his house—but Charlotte?

To define the precise moment when he began to think of Charlotte in connection with these calculations was beyond his ken. At first he laughed at himself, amused at the notion of his flying so high, and indeed not a little disposed to talk about the lady and his admiration for her, as a feather in his cap. This to Addy, who hung upon his lips:—

“You would never have thought it of me,” said he, as if he had done something to be proud of.

But one day the usual inquiry was met curtly.

“Oh, don’t bother. Miss Sunning is not your style, and you wouldn’t understand her. And I daresay you wouldn’t like her either,” was added after a pause. Charlotte had let her tongue run somewhat free that day.

“But I do like to hear about her, Drax.”

“There’s nothing to hear. I have told you all there was. I daresay there are dozens of smart women of the same cut, and this one only seems wonderful to a poor outsider who has no chance of seeing the rest.”

Charlotte had tormented him, being quick enough to discern that only his surface feelings had so far been stirred, and resenting a lack of depth and intensity in his tribute to her charms. It would be good for him to feel a little pain.

He felt it, irritated by it. It opened an inner skin; she penetrated the opening; and thenceforth neither Adeline nor any one else heard her name.

With the cruel note between his fingers now, and with the complex emotions it evoked struggling for the

mastery in his bosom, Drax was yet able to take to himself the proud man's comfort that he had shut the door upon his secret.

She had discovered it, but that he meant her to do ; indeed, he had barely refrained from speaking out during his last visit to the cottage—and since it now appeared that he had been deluding himself, making an ass of himself, and showing, in fact, his utter ignorance of the world and everything else, confounded idiot that he was ! he ought to be thankful for being let off—let off—he bit his lip, and tried to remember what it was he was ‘let off’.

It was a shame to say that women loved to boast of their conquests—here was a refutation of the fact. As to his having been led on, the bare phrase, when of its own accord it sought to thrust itself forward, made his cheek redden.

“Well, I *am* a damned fool!” he exclaimed.

The next minute he found himself arguing the point vehemently. “Can’t you see, you son of a jackass, that it’s you, you, *you*—and not any one else who has let you in for this? You must needs take for gospel every civil word thrown to you because you happen to be the nearest person handy, and an object of compassion besides. Dash it! couldn’t you see, you blind jackass? It was all kindness, pity—the poor creature left alone in London, a nice creature, too, who was too humble and altogether out of the pale—oh, she said her ‘kind’—*now* I know what that meant—ah-h—!” a long-drawn, bitter breath . . . “*that* was it, the hint that might have guided me, and that did give me a twinge, but no more. . . . So this had to follow. It’s plain enough, anyway. No fool could mistake this. Poor girl, she must have hated having to write it. Poor girl! To think I made her! . . . And how awfully near I was to——” To his disgust he found himself shaking like an aspen leaf.

The note was thrust out of sight, and in its place the usual pile of business communications resolutely attacked.

For some time Mr. Rotherham, frowning over these, had all the semblance of a person mastering details and absorbed in the task, but a knock at the door presently made him start: he was not ready with his orders.

"In a few minutes," he said, looking up impatiently. He found he knew nothing of what he ought to know. He had read, but the words, or rather their import, slipped through his brain; and as for the requirements of each individual case?—he must pull himself together and grasp these somehow.

With a strong effort of the will this was done, and during the next half-hour the small hand-bell in the private office tinkled incessantly, Mr. Rotherham being found by each successive underling summoned to his presence, in a sharp, fault-finding temper, which somewhat surprised clerks and message-boys, considering that there was nothing to account for it, and that they had usually a reasonable gentleman to deal with.

It was not till the last of these had departed that Drax sank back in his chair, and his head fell forward on his breast.

"Now then," he said.

He meant nothing, for there was nothing to mean, or to be done. Miss Sunning had so worded her communication that it precluded any reply, while yet keeping within the bounds of friendly politeness; she was so sorry to put him off, especially as it was his last Sunday, but her mother—we know the rest.

Where were they going? There was no intimation. A vague hope of meeting again 'some time or other' and apologies for writing 'in haste' concluded the brief

epistle, which now slowly found its way to sight again out of the breast-pocket of his coat.

He studied separately every word, he did not think there was 'haste' in any of them. Charlotte wrote an excellent hand, a finished hand, and it now betrayed her; since in the perturbation of her own spirits she had forgotten to seem to scrawl.

All hope that he had exaggerated the finality of his dismissal vanished as Drax Rotherham re-perused and meditated.

'Some time or other.' That meant when chance threw the two in each other's way again as cool and easy acquaintances. He was not to seek her; he was to cease to think of her.

At this for a moment his passion flamed up.

Why then had she allowed him to look, to dream, to say what he had already said? There had been a silent meeting of the hands too—a royal moment beneath the dusky heavens, when, but that a sound or movement on his part would have broken the charm, he had certainly overleapt all barriers. Why, why had Charlotte granted that moment?

He was back in it, living in it now—now as he closed his eyes and heard the whistle of the willows, and the low sighing of the night wind through the dry, fluttering leaves of the poplars overhead.

The two were within the shadow of the islet. She had been gathering river grasses, and held them towards him, and he—he held them too, his hand over hers, to look the closer and admire the more. Finally, he had extracted one on pretence of its rarity—it was the commonest of the bunch.

It was this, then? Of course, it must have been this, his last presumptuous act which told her all.

And how good of her, how brave and pitiful, and con-

siderate of feelings which must have shocked and pained, to preserve that calm demeanour and be to all appearance as she had ever been towards him.

She must have despised him.

A pause.

Perhaps not quite that. Surely he would have been more deserving of contempt had he remained a dull insensate in such a presence?

He reflected, too, that to love hopelessly was no discredit to the vilest, and that in Charlotte's letter there breathed no syllable of disdain. She merely thought it necessary to guard against a repetition of the scene, and too truly did her instinct guide her in this.

Already in imagination he had written to Addy the great news; excusing previous reticence, which might have been felt unbrotherly, by the well-worn plea that he had scarcely dared believe his happiness, and would not drop a hint lest it should prove delusive.

He had pictured the effect of Charlotte in all the lustre of her beauty and the dazzle of her equipment on his simple folks. How they would bow down before her! How his sisters would gaze and envy—poor little things! Charlotte would transform them with her magic touch and matchless taste, and they would realise at last their dreams of seeing something of the great world beneath her auspices.

He need not be ashamed of Addy and Evie; there was nothing to shame any one in their appearance or manners. Suddenly a thought occurred; he *had* felt, had once or twice experienced an odd emotion when he first knew Miss Sunning: it had occurred to him to be glad that his young sisters were not within hearing when she talked.

In the overflow of his spirits subsequently, when the speaker seemed a different being, he had cried "Pooh!"

at this, and explained it away to his entire satisfaction. What brilliant leader of society might not be spurred on by the applause of her audience to rattle off witticisms and innuendos for which it would be unfair to hold her responsible in her cooler moments? Alone with him, bright and bewitching as she was, Charlotte never transgressed. In future she would be all that fondest heart could desire.

Ah! such dreams—such dreams!

Shattered at his feet lay the house of cards, and Drax awoke to find half the morning gone, and a weight of work yet untouched before him.

Straightening his back he drew up to the desk and fell to; and it was only now and again, between directing an envelope and addressing himself to the study of the next despatch, that an involuntary sigh escaped, and the hands moved idly among the papers, and the eyes gazed into vacancy—while callers presently found Mr. Rotherham much as usual, only some of those who had been away and were now returned from their holidays looked at him critically and observed that the weather had been trying of late. Would it not be desirable to——

“Oh, yes, I’m going,” said he.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STARTLING APPARITION.

A FEW days of resignation to the inevitable had their due effect on Rotherham's mind. He was unhappy, but he was no longer self-abased and self-engrossed. "Come, be a man," he said to himself. "Others have had the same to suffer, and what they can bear, you can bear. It is hard luck"—but when he had got to the 'hard luck' he was almost philosophical.

He thought, however, that he might as well get away somewhere; out of England would be best, and as his holiday was due, he prepared for it, and set himself resolutely to think about it.

When contemplating a different future, he had let the idea take any shape or no shape, ready to adapt its form to whatever Charlotte dictated, since to be with her would be the one thing needful; and various plans had been hinted at in quiet talks which, however, had always concluded vaguely and indefinitely.

He had now to act on his own account; but to wander off by his solitary self afforded a prospect so dreary that a companion of some sort became in a manner a necessity, and he cast about in his mind among his friends, rapidly running over their probable merits and demerits in that capacity.

The result was not encouraging; he could not think of any one who would not jar upon him in his present frame of mind. If only Jack Pennington had been

available! Jack, with his solemn, friendly face, and **his** never-ending, still-beginning pipe, would have suited down to the ground a man with a grievance not for **the** world's eye.

He might have told Jack about it, and could see **the** silent nod of pure, undiluted sympathy with which **the** confidence would have been met.

Jack would have let him alone when he wished to be let alone, and could have been counted upon to smoke on unperturbed by any fretfulness or sullenness which a poor fellow out of sorts was only too likely to display on occasion.

Pennington, however, was not in England nor likely to be so; and such being the case, to dwell upon his virtues was sheer waste of time. Drax turned afresh to the list of names which had first presented itself, and he had just ruefully come to the conclusion that beggars must not be choosers, and that it was rather a question of whom he could get than of whom he would like, when the problem was solved for him in a manner the most unexpected.

He had despatched a note to an acquaintance who he knew was circumstanced like himself—detained in London till now, and now equally ready to fly from it—and was awaiting a reply without caring very much one way or the other what its tenor might be, when, walking homewards along Piccadilly, he was overtaken and accosted by a voice which at first seemed unfamiliar.

Sir George Tregillis had been the man he liked best of the Henley party, but he had never met Tregillis since, and had almost forgotten what he was like; it was by an effort of memory that he was able now to respond to a friendly salutation, and settle to whom it belonged—and while he is doing so, and exchanging preliminary

commonplaces, we will, in a few words, put our readers in touch with Sir George's affairs.

He had quitted Tarporley Castle, as we know, big with a purpose which at first seemed destined to be unfulfilled, for nearly a fortnight had gone by since this departure took place.

Tregillis was not a man of determination; a little thing put him off even when he had a serious end seriously in view; and on his arrival in Town he had to dress and dine and look at his letters before finding his way to Charles Street, to obtain the address which was his ultimate goal. The letters stayed his steps.

They were not very important, but a country squire with little to think about beyond his own concerns might be pardoned for considering them of the first magnitude—and as Tregillis ate his soup he frowned portentously over one open sheet in particular. It was from his agent, and related to a business matter as to which a reply by return was requested.

Several of the other communications had reference to the same subject, and, in fine, he quickly discovered that he would either have to write to three or four people—and he never put pen to paper if he could help it—or go down among the disputants himself, and settle the matter by word of mouth. Inclination, shame to say, prompted the latter course.

Now that he was away from Tarporley, and had had some hours wherein to digest the morning's conversation, his wrath and his valour were alike on the wane—and though he still intended to carry out the project with which he had set forth, he felt that it could wait. He would run down to Cornwall for a couple of nights, put all straight there, and return forthwith to start his love campaign.

Down he went, and there he stayed. First one thing

and then another demanded his attention; home instincts and influences re-asserted themselves and threw a chain about his neck; he lingered and lingered, each day telling himself that he would go the next—and how long this state of things might have lasted, and what might have been the end of it, no one can say, had it not been for the introduction of a new and potential element.

The James Tregillises, the cousins whose cousinship and heirship the bachelor baronet so keenly resented, did something, no matter what, to vex anew their kinsman, always ready to conceive affront and deep design on the part of those artful pretenders (a healthy, thriving prejudice of very ancient standing), and Charlotte's image on the other hand rose to view as a counterfoil.

Hot-foot, off he set from Tregillis Court, just as he had bounced away from Tarporley Castle, and this time made straight for the little door in Mayfair; and well he did, and did not go before—well for the reputation of the ladies, be it understood—for now, what news! The very news he most desired to hear! The news that would of itself go far towards confuting Lord Tarporley's insinuations. Mrs. Sunning *was* ill, Charlotte *had* told the truth—and he had Charlotte's address in his pocket.

He was coming away, head in air, from the house, when he met a friend, and this friend was now civilly presented to Rotherham, who, being close to his club door, invited the two in, on a hint from Tregillis.

Tregillis looked upon this chance encounter as a god-send.

Rotherham was the very man he would have chosen to meet at the moment—the only man he would have run after to speak to. As, however, he could not well burst out with Miss Sunning's name in mid-street, *à propos* of nothing, he was talking on to gain time, when the

thrice happy idea occurred that Rotherham might be a member of the Sports' Club and be wending his way thither. In a few minutes the three were seated round a small table.

And now the odd thing happened, which seemed a mere whimsical suggestion at the time, but which was to affect Drax Rotherham's whole future life.

"Going abroad, are you?"

Tregillis, looking this way and that for an opening to introduce his own affairs, thought he saw one, and made a dart for it.

"So is Mr. Alban here. Been bothering me to go with him, but I have—hum—ha—an engagement. At least a—a—somewhere else to go. Some friends—oh, by the way, you know them too, Rotherham, the Sunnings——"

"Yes?" said Drax, calmly. He would not have spoken but that there was a pause for reply.

"Mrs. Sunning has had an accident, did you hear?"

"No."

"Seen them since they left Town?" pursued Sir George, easily.

Drax owned he had seen them.

"Little house up the river. No, I've not been there yet, but I'm going. Going to inquire and all that. P'raps, however, *you* can tell me?" (How wily, how diplomatic, how natural the question. No one could suspect anything in it.)

"Not so much as you know yourself," replied Rotherham; "I had not heard of the accident."

He had said this before, but neither of the two noticed the repetition.

"When did you see them last?" demanded Sir George, coming to the point at last. A plain question must elicit a plain answer, and he was not quite sure that his ear

did not detect an ominous reserve in the other's tone. But for Lord Tarporley's tattle this might have passed unnoticed; but, as it was, he was sufficiently aroused to be suspicious.

"Last Sunday. I heard from Miss Sunning that her mother was unwell on Tuesday morning. The letter should have reached me on Monday, but it was sent to my address in the City, and I had left for the day."

"And she said nothing about an accident?"

"Nothing. She wrote to put me off. I had been going to them the end of this week. Miss Sunning wrote that they were obliged to come to Town at once—but that was all." A simple statement of facts which told nothing was best in the speaker's judgment, but he did not make it without pain.

"That's odd," said Sir George, bluntly. "People are deucedly afraid of its getting about when they've hurt themselves, though," added he, looking up with a shrewd afterthought; "seem to fancy it's a sort of disgrace, don't you know? But anyway, Charlotte—Miss Sunning—told you what she told the Tarporleys," with emphasis—he did not add "a fortnight ago," and Drax neither perceived nor would have heeded the discrepancy of dates, so it passed)—"and—and I'm going to see them," concluded Charlotte's self-constituted champion, thumping down the words as though he would have liked to hear them bang, the while he grew red in the face, and snorted resolution.

Now Drax had heard Charlotte define Tregillis, and could scarce forbear smiling. He understood imperfectly; still, he wondered whether he should say anything or not.

Perhaps Tregillis was not in earnest? perhaps he was only throwing out 'a feeler'? He certainly looked a trifle annoyed on hearing of visits and letters, betoken-

ing an intimacy for which he was possibly unprepared, and might be merely anxious to show that he too could reckon on a welcome at The Island Cottage.

In this case there was no need to offer unasked any further information—but scarcely had the idea arisen than Drax received a shock.

“I’ve just been to the house for the address. You spoke of their coming to Town, but the woman at the house said she hadn’t received any orders, and letters are going just the same to the cottage. I thought p’raps they’d have left—or be leaving—but the woman said”—Sir George’s fingers played round his empty tumbler as he spoke—“there were no orders given——”

“Have another, won’t you?” Suddenly the host started forward all in a bustle of hospitable solicitude, “Or is there anything else? This beastly hot weather—though it’s odd I should complain after India; but there we have punkahs,” and he prattled on.

Something of the same feeling which at Tarporley Castle actuated Tregillis, the very Tregillis who was now unconsciously exposing the lady he had championed before, to refuse enlightenment where Charlotte was concerned, set Rotherham’s tongue wagging. He would not hear; he would not pry and spy; he would know nothing of what any tattling ‘woman said’—and if Tregillis had obtained information by these means (poor Tregillis! he was innocent as a babe of any ill intention, but what rival would stop to consider this?) he should not be suffered to impart it.

At this point Drax turned with decision to the third person of the party, who had dropped out of the conversation as soon as the Sunnings became the subject of it, and more for something to say than from any other motive, recurred to Sir George Tregillis’ casual remark about his friend’s going abroad.

"Why don't you go together?" cried Tregillis on the instant. In half-an-hour they had agreed to go together.

It was so quickly done, done with such absence of caution and discretion on Drax Rotherham's part, that prudence might have predicted a direful end to such a rash beginning, but perhaps even that veiled prophet would have hesitated had he studied the aspect of Sebastian Alban.

To Sir George Tregillis, indeed, Alban, an old school-fellow, and further his own fag, whom he had by turns petted and bullied, was merely a friend whom he was always glad to meet for the sake of old times, and who was never too grand nor too busy for a talk about them.

"Though they tell me he's a tremendous swell nowadays," the simple Tregillis would say with a look of awe. "But he never thrusts religion and that sort of thing down one's throat;" he would add, reassuringly. "Alban is a good sort." This was the limit of his appreciation.

Nor did Rotherham, it must be owned, go a whit beyond it, during his first interview with the most remarkable individual he had ever met in his life. Until his attention was specially directed towards Sir George's companion, he merely bestowed upon him the cursory glance of perfunctory civility, acknowledged the introduction, and included both gentlemen in proffers of hospitality.

When Charlotte Sunning began to be talked of he forgot all but the talker, and it was not till with the desire to escape further communications on the subject he hastily turned from it to another in which Mr. Alban could bear a part, that he might be said really to have seen him at all.

It was a strange, eager, concentrated, young-old face which now fell beneath Drax Rotherham's scrutiny.

The heavy forehead and overhanging brows betokened the scholar, the prominent chin and firmly cut mouth, the man of power. Even in repose the dark, brilliant eyes, the solitary beauty of the somewhat pale and worn countenance, glowed and burned. In the smile there was a wonderful sweetness.

Yet such is man, that of all this neither the old friend nor the new acquaintance perceived anything beyond a prepossessing exterior which merited, shall we say, their tolerance. Each of them stood over six foot high in his stocking soles; could they resist condescending, not wittingly but involuntarily, from this altitude, towards the diminutive form which neither in height nor breadth approached their proportions?

Sir George Tregillis cocked his eye and looked down at Alban when he spoke to him. In Alban's company he always forgot that the little boy of old was the great man of now. He could not, he declared, think of 'Tanny' Alban without laughing when he saw the people streaming in to hear him preach, and Lady Henrietta Dimsdale, that august dowager, hurrying along for dear life to be in time.

In another mood he would be proud of 'Tanny's' success.

"Give *you* points, my boy; tackle him on any subject you choose," if another also reminisced and were disposed to be jocular; "don't you kid yourself you can patronise 'Tanny' now." And the good fellow would wag his head delightedly.

He made a point of looking up Alban whenever he was in Town, and with a marvellous display of tact dropped the old nickname from the very beginning of the renewal of friendship.

"That sort of thing don't do, you know. Alban is not stuck up, not a bit; but there is such a thing as good

taste, and I hope I know better than to chaff a fellow in a way a fellow mayn't like."

Once it was suggested that the burly sportsman and the fragile scholar could hardly have much in common, whereat the former was loudly indignant.

He wasn't such a fool as he looked; if he hadn't brains like Alban, no one else had either.

What did they find to talk about?

Lots of things. He would wish for no better company. There was nothing Alban wasn't interested in, from the breaking-in of a thoroughbred to the casting of a salmon-fly. Alban would stop at Tregillis Court sometimes, amuse himself, and bore nobody, all day long—and when the bishop wanted to cart him away—came over on purpose, with Mrs. bishop too—Alban simply wouldn't go—no, by Jove! he wouldn't.

The exultation of that moment was never forgotten by the honest Cornishman.

He had a parent-bird's pride in the nestling whose mysterious powers compelled such homage; while yet there intermingled with this the kind of tender condescension of the physically strong for the physically weak, of the man all muscle and sinew for the man all nerve and brain; and to walk along Pall Mall or Piccadilly with Alban by his side gratified his feelings in both respects.

Having defined his own position and plans, Tregillis was now at leisure to recur to the topic which his companion had barely started ere the appearance of Drax Rotherham cut it short, and by suggesting another train of thought completely ousted it also from memory; but, having recollected, the next thing was to dash at the opening afforded by the latter's inquiry.

If Sir George were unable, however, as many Sir Georges are, to think of more than one thing at a time,

some one else was accomplishing this feat with perfect ease and success. More than once Rotherham, had he lifted his eyes, would have met a fixed, penetrating gaze, which could hardly have failed to arrest his attention—indeed, it was only the supreme and engrossing interest he took in what Tregillis was saying which caused him to remain unconscious of it.

“So this is Drax Rotherham,” the young cleric was saying to himself.

He was the junior by several years of both the others, but in a thousand ways he was an old man, and they were boys. He was studying the ‘new boy’s’ character now, and telling himself that Rotherham would ‘do’. He had particularly desired to meet Rotherham, who had once been pointed out to him, but hitherto no opportunity had offered; it was a curious thing that they should meet like this.

And then came Tregillis’ foolish speech which might have entailed such awkwardness on all three! To call upon two men who have barely interchanged a dozen sentences to join company for several weeks of foreign travel—a test of affection, temper, patience and every virtue under the sun—was surely an unheard of piece of *grossièreté* only to be turned aside by an evasive, meaningless rejoinder.

To Rotherham’s surprise, however, his own uneasy laugh, for he could think of nothing to do but to laugh, was met by a quick, friendly glance and cordial “I am sure *I* should be exceedingly happy,” which fairly took his breath away. The same phrase on the lips of another speaker would have elicited either a budget of excuses, or a stream of interrogations and semi-serious stipulations—since he could hardly fancy himself rushing headlong into an intimacy which might be productive of

so much varied discomfort ; and to get out of the scrape without offence would have been the one desideratum.

Moreover, in that case he could have reckoned on being met half-way—but now, extraordinary!—not only was there no such co-operation on Mr. Alban's part, but he was actually looking acquiescence in the preposterous scheme! It was strange, and yet——

"Do let us try it," said Alban in cheerful, persuasive accents. "Shall we? *I* am not afraid, if *you* aren't, Mr. Rotherham. And if the coalition does not answer, we have always Tregillis to abuse for it."

"Eh? Oh, I say——" but Tregillis caught himself up, and with one of those flashes of common-sense which stood him in lieu of ability or wit, turned full upon Drax a round face from which mirth and banter were totally eliminated.

"Rotherham, look here. Though the idea was mine, and I'm not much of a fellow for ideas, you'll jolly well thank your stars if you take it up. *He*"—nodding at the boyish figure opposite—"could get any man or woman in England to go with him if he chose——"

"My dear Tregillis! My dear Tregillis!"

"It's a fact"—Tregillis edging off, and stoutly maintaining his ground. "Why there isn't one of the what-d'ye-call-'ems in London can hold a candle to him——"

"You shut up!" said Alban, laughing outright this time. "Pray, Mr. Rotherham, pray don't let him put you off by this. It is only George Tregillis' way.  give me a trial on my merits. I will do my best to please. And if you desire a character——"

"It is not *you* but *I* who ought to furnish a character, Mr. Alban. Every one knows you—no one knows me." To himself he added: "Except one. And she, the only

friend to whom I have ever tried to make myself known, casts me off."

A sigh escaped ere Rotherham knew, and he passed his hand over his eyes for a moment's reflection, but when he next spoke his tone was brisker. Had he not been prepared to accept Cecil Gibbs as a companion?—Gibbs, whose sole recommendation consisted in the absence of aggressive disagreeableness?—Gibbs, a dull, plodding ass, whose one query in each new place would have been, "What hotel will 'do' us the best?"

On a sudden a vision of Gibbs, with his common face, stupid jokes, and love of creature comforts, made him shudder; and the sense of escape was so great—for he had opened a note, and found that it contained a refusal, on his way through the hall—that he turned, as we say, with a greater show of alacrity than he had yet exhibited to his proposed fellow-traveller.

Alban was patiently waiting. He might have been secretly a little amused by the irresolution of an obscure individual, when the highest in the land would not have disdained what Drax was in evident doubt as to accepting—but there was no sign of this on his countenance, no wounded vanity in his air.

And then Drax spoke manfully out.

"Mr. Alban will, I know, pardon me for being at first afraid of his great reputation. We poor 'daily bread' workers, who don't get much time for reading and all that, what sort of company are we for a man like you?" now facing Alban direct, and speaking with much earnestness and simplicity. "Still, if you will, sir, do me the honour——"

"Tregillis, it's settled."

Tregillis was jubilant. That he should have achieved such a master-stroke—for he felt in his bones that a master-stroke it was—elated him to the last degree.

Who could say now that he didn't know a thing or two? Hadn't he seen at a glance that those two, the learned brilliant, overworked and mind-wearied little man, and the big, simple fellow, to whom the world was still fresh and new—(how jolly he was at Henley, to be sure)—would fit each other like a pair of gloves?

And he would see them off, that he would; presiding over the coalition, his own coalition, to the final moment. And then? Then he would carry out his other mighty project with similar ease and success.

"Are you really stopping in Town to-night?" said Alban. "I thought you were due——"

"Oh, it'll do to-morrow," quoth Tregillis, gaily.

So that it was not until the next afternoon that he actually found himself at liberty and on his way to The Island Cottage.

Mrs. Sunning was now so far recovered as to be out upon the lawn, ensconced in a recumbent chair, to which she had just descended for the second time when her, or, to be correct, Charlotte's visitor appeared.

From where she sat, Charlotte could be seen in the boat, which she had taken across the narrow bit of water below and moored in the shade of the willow bank opposite—and her mother's first sensation was one of thankfulness that for once an unexpected arrival would find the young lady doing nothing she ought not to be doing.

What could be more harmless, more innocent, more praiseworthy, than sitting in a boat, reading or meditating? It looked well, too, that she was within earshot, keeping a sort of watch over her invalid. "Dear Charlotte can hardly be induced to take proper exercise," she could say with all the proper pride in a dutiful daughter suitable to the occasion.

In the morning it had been, "You are doing your

best to worry me into a fever by your absurd flirtation with this Jocelyn. What? What do you say? Nothing? Of course it is nothing—I never said it was anything. But it annoys me. It is so undignified; it ought to be beneath you. . . . Setting yourself to turn his head, as if he were precisely on your own level, so that I dare say he thinks he is, and goes about boasting of his intimacy. I am astonished that you do not see how you are letting yourself down. Quite degrading, I call it."

"Tra-la-la!" hooted Charlotte.

"Yes; that is just like you. Anything for admiration. A boot-boy would be sufficient."

"Provided he were an appreciative boot-boy. But you are hard upon Jocelyn, mum. My Joss-stick is a good many cuts above a boot-boy," and she succeeded in arguing and diverting the patient back into good-humour, ere she ran off to the boat.

The morning was Jocelyn's time, and he had come and gone—(praise be blessed!)—hours before Sir George Tregillis—(hail! welcome sight!)—stepped through the window by which the former had vanished, to re-appear no more that day.

"My dear Sir George!" ("Dear me, how delightful!" whispered she to herself, all in a flutter, for surely she could not be mistaken, and there really was an unmistakable air about the man.) "Where did you come from?" cried the widow, bending forward with outstretched hand, "and how did you find us out? Charlotte——" looking across the lawn.

But she did not call Charlotte; she behaved decorously; also, there was a little dawning hope that perhaps, just perhaps, Sir George might have something to say to her first—and if so, why rob him of his opportunity?

"Hum — ha!" said he, seating himself. "Yes.

Heard you'd been ill, Mrs. Sunning. Hope you're better?"

The illness, or rather the accident, disposed of, he had to own how he had heard of it.

"And you came down here on purpose to inquire! How very, very good of you. It is charming to see a friend. We are quite out of the way of having callers. The door-bell scarcely ever rings. Charlotte, poor child, has felt so lonely, so cut off——"

"That's her parasol, I suppose?" He eyed it longingly. She was sure she was right in reading longing and impatience in his eye. The dear man! She would not detain him; appearances went for nothing when *that* was in the question—oh! what a blessing it was that neither Jocelyn with his lively laughter nor Drax Rotherham with his far more ominous and significant quietude was sitting now by dear, lucky Charlotte's side.

Charlotte was so thoughtless; did not see how she was throwing away the substance for the shadow; it was wonderful that she had not already spoilt all—but now, if Providence really did design to take the heedless girl beneath its wing, and, despite her folly and waywardness, throw this prize into her lap, all would be forgotten and forgiven. Wherefore to the above inquiry she replied with joyful promptitude: "Charlotte's parasol. Yes. That red spot peeping through the green. She has curled herself up in that little nook," laughed the widow, dexterously tempting him, for she thought by this time he might as well go and curl himself up there likewise; "I would offer to escort you down, but—stop! I will call."

She did not, however, need to call. Charlotte, whose back had hitherto been turned, chanced to look round and perceive that the lawn which she had left untenanted was so no longer; Mrs. Sunning had re-appeared after

her usual two hours' rest and nap, and beside her basket-chair was a masculine form whose outline appeared familiar.

"Looks like George Tregillis," murmured Charlotte to herself.

But so far from mentally echoing her mother's self-gratulations on reaching the same conclusion, her countenance wore an expression so deeply disconcerted that some one else, invisible to all but herself, demanded from the bottom of the boat what was the matter.

"You'll have to show up, Gerry," she said, shortly.

She tried to smile, but the smile was altogether forced and unnatural, and snapping the red parasol to with a jerk, Charlotte proceeded with asperity:—

"It's no use hiding there; you'll have to get up and be seen *some* time. Be quick. They're looking."

And looking they were, for no Witch of Endor was ever more amazed by the result of her incantations than was the ill-fated Mrs. Sunning by the effect of her waving handkerchief.

Perceiving the small commotion in the boat—for her daughter had half risen and was openly staring through the thin veil of leaves and stems—(she was so very near that these could be seen through)—the invalid saved her breath, and flung out, as it were, a white flag in its place; but she could have yelled in her fury and horror when, in response to this peaceful summons, there reared itself up from depths unknown —(this was how she put it to herself)—an interminable length of white flannel, whose scarlet face proclaimed itself to belong to Gerry Brown.

Little weak woman though she was, old and impotent as she felt herself to be, the widow could have slain Gerry with her own hands. What in the name of all that was cruel and horrible could have sent him hither?

What demon breathing hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness could have brought about this hideous moment?

And Sir George was looking to her for an explanation. And she had said—what had she said? Oh, for one moment to remember! Surely something about loneliness and solitude, something to which the presence of that infamous Gerry must give the lie direct!

The plea of ignorance would perchance make matters worse, and yet put it forth she must, since her start had been too palpable to be overlooked, and if ever in her life Charlotte's ill-used parent felt herself to be deserving of pity, it was when now addressing the mute figure by her side in a vain attempt at jocularly.

"Another kind inquirer like yourself, I see. This is an afternoon of surprises. I had no idea that any one was there, but Mr. Brown must have arrived when I was upstairs; and Charlotte, dear child, is so considerate she would not wake me. I have to rest by doctor's orders, Sir George. Here they come!" as the delinquents by guilty consent in silence paddled across.

"Charlotte, love, you see we have each a visitor," giggled the unfortunate lady, hysterically.

"How do, Sir George?" said Charlotte.

She did not deceive herself; she saw the look upon his face, a look which said "Never again, my lady. You will never deceive George Tregillis again," and steeled herself to brazen it out.

"This is an unexpected honour," she cried, jumping ashore and flinging a "Bring those things along, Gerry," over her shoulder. "After being deserted by our friends for weeks and weeks, we seem to be the fashion all at once. How goes the world without, Sir George?" and she threw herself into a chair, motioning him to do the same. She had barely touched his hand with the tips of her fingers *en passant*.

"I heard of Mrs. Sunning's accident," said he, stiffly. Stiffness bristled in his very eyelids.

"That was it, was it? Gerry heard nothing. *He* came without hearing." And Gerry had a killing glance.

"Oh, but of course I should—that is, I mean——" stammered the enraptured youth; "I say, you know—I mean I should have come if—if——"

If all the fiends of Hell were at your heels dragging you back. That is what you mean, isn't it?" said Charlotte, approvingly. "Sir George only comes because his sense of duty impels him. We are awfully obliged of course, all the same. Mother, why don't you back me up in saying we are awfully obliged? Have you exhausted all your pretty speeches before I came?"

"Apparently *you* have." But Mrs. Sunning for all her appearance of vexation, seized upon this very appearance as a thing of marketable value. Charlotte's ill-temper and her own annoyance thereat might be turned to account. "What are you angry about, you foolish child? Sir George has used us no worse by absenting himself than numbers of others have done, and it is too bad to vent your displeasure upon him just because he happens to be within reach. So like our illogical sex, is it not, Sir George, to scold one offender for the sins of all? And the only offender who has redeemed his character, too," turning upon him as she spoke a smile so sweet and tender that he shuddered with disgust. Charlotte's insolence was preferable to this.

He half admired Charlotte by contrast. No one could say the girl wanted pluck, and having been 'cornered' without possibility of escape, she had no choice but to make a dash for freedom. To have appeared to defend herself would have been a fatal mistake.

Besides, after all, what harm, according to her ideas of harm, was there in Gerry Brown or any one else lying

at her feet during a lazy afternoon? "It's only that I don't choose to be one of two," reflected Tregillis, proudly; a host of Tarpy's ugly insinuations rushing into his mind. Hadn't he scoffed at the bare idea of this long-legged lad with his ridiculous adoration, and hadn't Tarpy told him something — something — he couldn't recollect what, about Gerry and a former love story?

Gerry now wore a triumphant, blissful air. Usually he was the meekest of human beings, and so easily circumvented and out-manceuvred as to be scarce worth powder and shot—but Tregillis understood what this transfiguration meant. Indeed, he deduced from it more than it meant, for it appeared clear to him that Charlotte had summoned his rival, and brought him to her feet—whether for present use only, or for all time, being of no consequence—whereas Charlotte, as we know, had done nothing of the kind.

Jocelyn and his melodious voice had been enough for her, by which we do not mean enough to make her forget Drax Rotherham, nor even to solidify her resolution regarding him, but enough to keep her vanity amused, and her heart silent; so that she had had no need to call in the aid of another, and Gerry's accidental appearance was superfluous.

However, he had had it all his own way, for, from beginning with only a fair show of cordiality, Charlotte had warmed up, and the two were having quite a nice little time of it in their willow nook—(the same in which Drax had his divine moment, but ah! she never thought of that)—till puff! bang! away went the whole in a cloud of smoke, and one of the pair, at any rate, realised that in the pretty game of love-making one occasionally has to pay a forfeit.

Charlotte was always trying to make Tregillis propose

to her. Not that she cared for him, or believed greatly in the likelihood of his caring for her, but he was the only man she knew who would be alike eligible and sufferable.

Putting Lord Tarporley on one side, that was. But she never counted Tarp on her list of realities, having no illusions on that score.

It was rather disgusting to be done out of her Cornish gull by her Brown Bottle (the Browns were brewers—hence the nickname for the lanky, sloping-shouldered Gerry), and Charlotte as a rule did not show at her best when things were ‘rather disgusting’ her—but on this occasion, after the first ebullition, even her mother wondered and pondered. Was it possible that the rent might yet be repaired?

“You turned them both away!” cried she, an hour after. “And poor Sir George had come down on purpose! Of course he ought to have been asked to stay. For dinner, at any rate.”

Charlotte looked at her mother, a peculiar expression in her eyes.

“Now, don’t be ridiculous,” ran on Mrs. Sunning, with considerable irritation, “you know what I mean perfectly well. There is no need to pretend that you were not taken aback when you were caught with that wretched boy lolling down there with his head on your lap——”

“How did you know his head was on my lap?”

“I—well I—have no doubt it was.” She remembered now that she could not have seen, and was forced to admit she could but suspect.

“As it happens, it was nothing of the kind. It was on a cushion, or rather on his own two hands. He could see me best like that. Gerry was doing no harm. I don’t see why George Tregillis need take it upon himself——” she paused abruptly, she had been thinking aloud.

"It was most tiresome of you," reiterated Mrs. Sunning, querulously. "Could you not have taken him up the river and out of sight? To have gone for a row would have been nothing."

"It would have been nothing as it was, but for——"

"My assertions, I suppose you will say. Of course I made them. I knew nothing of that odious boy's arrival. I was perfectly petrified when he rose up from the boat."

"So was your companion, I gather. It did for him. Well," after a pause, "farewell to the gull. We shall see *him* no more——"

"But Charlotte—Charlotte!" with a gasp of curiosity and nervous excitement, "Charlotte!" implored her mother, catching her by the dress as she moved away, "surely that rests with you. You were foolish and unfortunate this afternoon, I admit—but, oh, my dear child! my *dear* child," letting go in order to wring her hands.

"What is the use of 'dear child-ing' me?" said Charlotte in a clear, cutting voice. "It ought to be to him you should appeal. 'My dear Sir George—my *dear* Sir George!'" mimicking.

Receiving no encouragement, she proceeded: "Perhaps he would listen to you; he is so fond of you,"—but despite her light, mocking tone there was an underlying mortification which did not escape her mother's ear.

"Well?" continued Charlotte, as still no reply was forthcoming; "you don't feel drawn towards making the attempt?"

Mrs. Sunning hastily amended her attitude; a little maternal tenderness would not be amiss at this juncture.

"I know what you mean, my poor dear. Sir George does not, never did care for me; he fancies that I—but never mind, *I* am nothing, it is *you* who are and ought

to be the one consideration in this matter. And I cannot help fearing that this playing with edged tools will end—will end——”

“End? Yes. How will it end?” curiously.

“Let us look it in the face, Charlotte.”

“I am willing”—but the tone was colder.

Mrs. Sunning, however, plucked up her courage. More than once of late she had come off victorious in a struggle when the outlook loomed as black, or even blacker than it did now, and accordingly:—

“The world would not call it a brilliant marriage,” insinuated she, “not exceptionally brilliant; not so much so that you would be accused of any lack of—of sentiment. For myself,” with increasing solemnity, “I feel convinced that if you reject this good man’s love, you throw away your one chance of happiness——”

“*That* I did a week ago,” said Charlotte. And such was her look that her mother’s eye sank beneath it.

Muttering something too low for its import to be heard, she was about to yield the point for the time being, when her departing steps were arrested by an imperious, disdainful gesture.

“I may as well tell you—it is as well that you should know, in order to prevent future mistakes,” said Charlotte, speaking rapidly, and turning her head this way and that, in agitation which she vainly strove to conceal—it was due, and she knew it, to the last remark—“that I did—did do—what you say. I did demean myself to beg the company of Sir George Tregillis for this evening!”

“You did? Charlotte!”

“And he refused me.”

“But, my love, my dear love”—Mrs. Sunning crept closer, and put out her hand: Charlotte recoiled as if it were a serpent approaching.

"Don't! Don't touch me! I had rather you didn't. It was more to please you than for my own sake that I made myself do it. Oh, how I wish I hadn't!" With lips compressed, she seemed about to stop, but next minute started afresh. "It is to you, my mother, that I owe this humiliation. What? . . . What do you say? . . . You think it can be 'put right'? It can't. . . . I'm not sure now that I would have him if he asked me. I ought to be sure that I would *not*—I who, if I care for any one, care for another man—oh, *you know* I do; and it was but a week ago, and you expect me to have forgotten"—she paused, her chest heaving, but she took breath and proceeded: "Don't mistake, however. George Tregillis knows nothing of this; it was what he saw to-day which decided him. Why it should—why he should have made so much of it, I can't tell—but I suspect. He was lately at Tarporley Castle, and Lord Tarporley is more a man of the world than our friend of to-day. He knows," reluctantly, "about poor Gerry and his infatuation, and—and how it began."

"That old story, Charlotte!" contemptuously.

"Even so; that old story."

"If he is going to stick at *that*—you couldn't help it; it was not your fault—and upon my word," a gleam of humour flitted across Mrs. Sunning's countenance, "if that little affair was enough for this fastidious gentleman——"

Charlotte reddened.

"Others might have proved too much. Obligated to you for your perception, mother. That was precisely what I was thinking, and I fancied if you took in the true state of the case, your regrets might be fewer. That's all," and she moved away, but her step was not as light as usual.

CHAPTER IX.

A GUIDE, COUNSELLOR, AND FRIEND.

It was towards the close of the last day of September—warm, bright and still; and the beautiful waters of Lake Neuchâtel never looked more beautiful than at that sunset hour, with the rosy and purple hues of the clear sky overhead reflected on their glassy surface.

Two men sat in a boat fishing; but the fish were coy, and for some time each hung over the side in silence watching his line, with thoughts elsewhere.

At length Rotherham turned to his companion, shifting his position slightly as he spoke.

"I agree with all you say, but——" he paused as if for a reply. Obviously the remark was meant to be the beginning of a new conversation on an old theme.

"But?——" said Alban, quietly.

"Oh, I don't know why there should be a 'but'; I was only thinking it might be a little difficult, you know. One would have to—and yet, I don't know why one shouldn't. I have always had the greatest respect for religion, and though I have never professed to—to——"

"I understand."

"Still, I have always kept straight, you know."

"I am sure you have. May I say who you remind me of, Rotherham? You know your New Testament; have read it as a boy, at any rate? Well," receiving an affirmative nod, "can you recall a certain 'young ruler' who came to listen to our Lord's teaching——"

"I say! You wouldn't compare me to him!"

Alban smiled at the awestruck tone so typical of the man's nature.

"But he was a fearful swell," proceeded Drax, expostulating. "I remember the story very well. He was told to keep the commandments, and said he had kept them all his life."

"'Kept straight,'" said Alban, with a very kind look.

"Perhaps I ought not to have said that. I daresay it was presuming—but I didn't want you to think what wasn't true. I wanted to be quite fair with you."

"I know it, my dear fellow, and you were right to say it. Why shouldn't you be as honest with me as that young man was with our Master? Am I not my Master's servant, trying to follow in His steps and persuade you if I can, as I hope I already have done, to be His true follower, while yet you may have many years of glorious life in front?—and why shouldn't I look upon you and love you as Jesus Christ looked upon His would-be disciple?"

"You have been awfully good to me, Alban." Subdued emotion found utterance in the simple words. "I was not very happy when I fell in with you," continued Drax, after a pause. "Something had happened. The usual thing, I suppose; and I was just staggering about on my feet after the knock-down blow when I met Tregillis and you. It was rather strange my doing that, wasn't it? For *me*, of course, I mean; and I have often thought since of Tregillis saying that I should 'jolly well thank my stars' if his proposal of our coming away together took effect. I have," emphatically.

"And we are going to swear eternal friendship," rejoined Alban, "and don't you puff me up about it. I shall come upon you to do me a good turn in my evil hour one of these days, and remind you of to-night."

"I can't fancy your having the sort of 'evil hour' I mean," said Drax, who hardly knew whether he wished to be pressed on the point or not. He had studiously kept his own affairs—or, to be more correct, his own unfortunate love affair out of sight during the fortnight which had elapsed since he and Sebastian Alban had been thrown entirely upon each other for companionship; otherwise he had grown communicative and discursive to a degree that astonished himself.

The two had talked and talked; so that the life of each stood now in a considerable measure revealed to the other—but still the recent experience beneath which one of them was smarting remained entombed. "He is a wonderful fellow, but he wouldn't understand *that*," thought Rotherham.

Something now impelled him to query, was he correct in his surmise?

To his plain, straightforward nature it had seemed hitherto impossible that Alban, having any sympathy or fellow-feeling with such a subject, would not let it form at times a part of their conversation, would not indeed have divined that it had a special and peculiar interest for himself—yet again *he* had not spoken, why should the other?

He was weighing and considering, his thoughts far from his idle rod and drifting line, when like a clap of thunder on his ear fell the gentle words—

"What about Charlotte Sunning?"

"Charlotte Sunning!" Rotherham's heart leapt into his throat. "Charlotte Sunning!" If all the mountains round had shouted aloud that name, it would scarcely have startled him more; his hands unclasped their hold as he turned and stared at his companion.

"Pray forgive me," said Alban in the same soft tone, and smiling a little withal. "You have chosen me for

your father confessor, you know ; and it seemed the time had come——”

“ But—but——” stammered Drax, all confusion and bewilderment ; “ oh yes, of course—of course it’s all right—only I had no idea you knew anything—oh, I am very glad to—to speak of it. That is——” he broke off, and resumed more coherently, “ you took me by surprise, that was all. It isn’t that I *mind*.”

“ If you do, just say so, Rotherham.”

“ But I don’t. Only it gave me a bit of a shock. I still feel queer”—but here he laughed, and faced about boldly, the flush upon his cheek dying down. “ Did you know it would make me jump like that? Did you say it to—to——”

“ Take you by surprise. Yes. There, I have come to confession the sooner of the two, and meet I should. It was too bad of me. My only excuse is that I should have had to startle you at some time or other, however carefully I approached the subject, and I was base enough to enjoy producing a little melodramatic effect. Am I forgiven?”

“ Oh, it’s all right.” This time the speaker’s tone was more hearty. He settled his rod where it could be supported without his aid, put his hands in his coat pockets, and breathed a sigh.

“ I’m getting over it,” he said, presently.

“ Getting over having had a hypocrite for your friend and comrade all this time? One who was perfectly cognisant from the beginning of what made him a comfortable sort of old-woman-companion to jog along with? You wouldn’t have liked me to speak before, Rotherham, but I don’t think you will blow my brains out now?”

“ How on earth did you know? Tregillis?”

Alban shook his head.

“ George Tregillis stands blameless.” (“ Possibly

George is in the same boat as yourself," he mentally subjoined.)

"I can think of no one else," said Drax, rapidly considering. "Still some one—it couldn't have been *she*?—that is, I was not aware that you even knew her?"

"I have known Charlotte for years."

("Even he calls her 'Charlotte,'" reflected Drax. "I wish he didn't. I wonder why they all do?")

"Miss Sunning never told me," he said, aloud.

"Why should she? Yours is a very recent acquaintanceship; do you think—has it ever occurred to you that you have not yet been admitted to the inner rooms, that you are always received, as it were, in the state apartments of that lady's mind?"

"I know her very well," said Drax, with a little temper in his tone.

"That is to say you have been seeing a good deal of her during the last few months, more especially during the few weeks before you left England. You have spent a number of pleasant Saturday afternoons on the river, and you didn't go to church on the Sundays, finding 'Dr. Greenfields' more instructive—and stop! let me see, there was a certain nook in the little backwater——"

"But who the deuce told you all this?"

"And a lot more. First of all, let me exonerate the person who, I see, is accused of playing tell-tale in your mind. She merely mentioned you to me as—shall I be offending you?—an interesting specimen of a genus hitherto unknown. She spoke quite nicely about you; indeed, was rather full of your—come, blush, for it's worth a blush—your handsome looks. You had, I could see, made an impression on her, as much as any one could upon—well, never mind. By the way, one thing dropped out; Charlotte owned that you appeared chiefly remark-

able to her by contrast with the other men by whom she is ordinarily surrounded. You were, she said, good."

"Did she, did she say that?" He looked away; Alban could see he did so to hide his face.

"You may wonder, perhaps, how I come to be visiting the Sunnings, who are not my parishioners, and not the sort of people with whom I would naturally associate," continued the young clergyman; "but I am a sort of connection, and at one time—however, that will keep. I only wished to let you know how I began to take notice of you in connection with Charlotte. Oh, I see you wince when I call her 'Charlotte'—it *is* stupid, but I have never known her as anything else——"

"Oh, it doesn't matter. Besides," with a sigh, "why should it matter to *me*?"

"I am coming to that," proceeded Alban; "it does matter, and I think the higher of you for it. You are still——" he paused.

"I still think of her as I always have done," said Drax, emphatically. "That I fell into a mistake—a fool's mistake—in supposing she would ever allow me to think more makes no difference. That was my look-out. You wouldn't have me turn against a woman because she—because I—because of my disappointment? You couldn't think me such a brute as that?"

"Why should you suppose it, Rotherham?"

"Oh, I don't suppose it. Only you said 'still'. As if——"

"You see, although I know a good deal, I don't know the whole story. Shall I tell you what I do know, and then you can decide whether you care to fill in details?"

On receiving assent:—

"Do you remember," proceeded Alban, "two lads who travelled up and down with you every Saturday and Sunday during the time you were a weekly visitor to the

Sunnings' cottage. It happened that their trains suited you likewise, and you used to chat by the way. I don't know if they told you they knew the Sunnings?"

"*She* did. Oh yes, I remember. She said she knew their mother."

"Their mother is my sister. My nephews being left pretty much to their own resources this summer, were glad even of my dull society—well, it must have been dull for them," meeting disclaimer half-way; "I can't talk cricket as it should be talked, not as '*she is spoke*,'" laughing—"and those dear fellows naturally talked nothing else, until—we hit upon another subject. Now, don't go and think they meant to '*peach*,' Rotherham; and, for that matter, I saw no harm in listening to them. I hope you don't think there was any? No, of course. We all talk about each other; and when the boys told me of your weekly visits, and of how they used to be forever meeting and dodging you and some one else on the water, and how they were sure it was a '*case*' but took care never to '*let on*' to you that they saw anything, it seemed to them only a highly interesting little romance, while to me——"

"Yes, to you?"

"I don't know if you would wish me to say what shape it assumed to me."

Drax was silent.

It was one thing to confide his lover-like woes in an unbiased, sympathetic ear, it was another to find them the subject of discussion between himself and a person who he could not help suspecting had already an opinion, if not a prejudice, in possession of the field.

He felt annoyed and outwitted; Alban's attitude had a singularly discomposing effect. Also, he had all an independent man's jealousy of interference with his affairs—(hang it all! he had steered his own boat long

enough to show that he did not need any other hand at the helm, and, fine fellow in the main as Sebastian undoubtedly was, he had betrayed the cloven hoof at last. No priest but loved power, and, for the sake of obtaining it, would worm his way into any family secrets).

"Rotherham, I see you are angry with me. In your case I should be the same."

In a moment Rotherham felt differently.

"I *am* angry; but I don't want to be—I would much rather not be, and yet I can't help it, Alban."

There was something so boyish and sincere in the reply that it would have touched a heart of stone, and Alban was obviously moved.

"My dear fellow! my dear, brave, true-hearted fellow, that was well spoken," he cried, impetuously. "Oh, why can't we all be as honest? The world would be a better place. Here am I wounding and galling you at every turn, and you don't pretend it is not so, but simply say you 'can't help it'. No man likes to find that he has been spied upon and commented upon; and your frank resentment—upon my word, I wonder how you have had the patience to listen to me for so long! And yet if you knew!" The last words escaped with a change of voice and a quick, involuntary sigh.

"I have not the least doubt you meant it for the best," said Drax, with some little stateliness. "As you say, you were kind enough to take a sort of interest in me—(though why, I can't imagine, as you don't like Miss Sunning—oh, of course I can see you don't—and you could have had no other reason)—still I suppose it *was* that, and the boys saw that they might tell you things, and—and—no one meant any harm. I suppose none of us like to be talked about, as you say yourself; and certainly I never thought——" suddenly his discomfiture gave way beneath a sense of amusement. "The young

rascals!" he exclaimed, colouring and laughing, "who would have dreamed it of them? Butter wouldn't melt in their mouths when speaking to me, and it was nothing but 'runs' and 'catches' and 'leg before wicket' with them. Never a whisper of—of——"

"Boating by moonlight?"

"Djd they tell you that, too? We only went once. It was such a glorious night, and the day had been too hot for anything. But where did these young villains meet us? I never saw them."

"I suspect they were on the watch, if the truth must be told. But of this I can give you my positive assurance, my absolute word, that they made me their sole confidant. From the very beginning I said, 'Look here, lads, this goes no further,' and they promised." He paused. "It was not for Charlotte's sake, Rotherham, that I exacted that promise."

Drax sat still for a few minutes, thinking. Then he drew a breath, and took up again his discarded rod, with an air that meant the conversation was at an end.

"I should like to talk this out another time," he said, "when I have thought it over. I might say something now I should be sorry for afterwards; because it's all new and strange, and I have never had anybody yet to speak about it. Besides," with a smile of restored good-fellowship, "I can't get over those boys. That they should have taken me in like that! Me! Twice their age!"

Alban leaned over the side, saying nothing. It always amused him, and sometimes it affected him when Drax thought himself so very old and wise. To-day it did both; he experienced some of the same feeling which made Charlotte Sunning keep Rotherham by her side and motion away all her other associates on the Henley

house-boat ; there was a transparency of thought and of purpose about the man which had a strange attraction for their stronger, subtler natures. He was an instrument upon which each could play, and yet which never struck a false note. He was a limpid lake whose waters each could stir, yet in which no amount of stirring could raise a blur. Every emotion was instantly visible to their keen eyesight, but while they would not have exchanged characters with Drax Rotherham—as what human being conscious of superior faculties would exchange with one less gifted?—there was sometimes a twinge of regret ; life was so easy for such an one. Temptation met with so little response—glanced aside, instead of striking within.

When Alban, desirous of pursuing his holy vocation and enrolling beneath his Master's banner a recruit so worthy, set about the task, he envied—yes, then, he really envied Drax. He was prepared for some hesitation, some confession of doubts and difficulties. For himself, he had not yielded his soul without fierce internal conflicts, the memory of which still made him shrink when addressing himself towards the awakenment of another ; and that this other, in the present instance, had shown neither a sensitive reserve—neither reluctance nor resistance—but only a frank and ready acceptance of the higher life when set before him, evoked, as we say, an involuntary emotion of wonder not unmixed with envy.

Why should Christianity be so easy for one man, so hard for another ? In his own case, self-abandonment and self-discipline required an unrelaxing pressure, a close, keen watch, much prayer, a fervent, steady gaze into the unseen.

What vigilance did he not need to maintain over his own soul, he whose teaching brought so rich a harvest

of other souls into the vineyard? He whose influence was so far-reaching, so widespread, what secret passions and ambitions had he not to fight down?

And who could help him? It was no small part of his burden that he was forever the one to be appealed to by others, and that when he would fain have strengthened himself against a stronger, he could not find the stronger. He experienced the solitude of the mountain-top.

To such a man the companionship of Drax Rotherham was inexpressibly soothing and tranquillising. Rotherham could not, indeed, enter into those dark labyrinths through which at times Sebastian Alban's troubled soul must still wander; the mystery of creation with its unfathomed depths, its awful abysses of perplexity, its deadlock, where human understanding is concerned, was as little considered by him as by a child to whom the day begins and ends, and he sees but a sunrise and a sunset.

Drax had no questionings, no misgivings. He accepted literally, and with a reverent simplicity which Alban left untouched, such primal ideas as bear a new interpretation beneath the glare of modern science. Nothing was a problem.

But this very childlike faith and inconsequence, this absence of all curiosity and responsibility, made Alban as tender in handling his new disciple—it was Drax himself who used the term—as was his great Example, when on earth He led about His fishermen.

In a musing fit, Alban could almost see the form at his side casting from him all impediments and joining that little band with running feet. It was this vision which brought up the other, that of the young ruler whom Jesus loved, and he was just telling himself that in the case of Drax there seemed to be nothing 'lacking,' no hindrance towards a full and perfect acceptance of the

Christian life, when like a flash there darted into his mind the thought of Charlotte Sunning.

He had begun to forget about Charlotte. For the first few days of their intimate companionship he had indeed been in constant expectation of something being said about her; gauging Rotherham's nature as he did, he had wondered how long it would be before he was placed in possession of the whole story. That done, he would own lightly that he knew already some of its salient features, and with a little confidential sympathy, and a little salutary advice, the thing would drop—but as time passed and the subject was never broached, Alban, growing interested in his new friend for his own sake, as we say, forgot.

It was not till the summer evening on which we find the two fishing the calm waters of Lake Neuchâtel that, with a fresh mental, and now, for the first time, outspoken reference to the prototype he had chosen for Rotherham, there seemed also to come the answer to his query, 'lacked' he anything?

Was it possible that at last he had hit upon a stumbling-block? Charlotte? He paused and thought. He did not underestimate Charlotte.

That she should look upon Drax Rotherham in any light save that of a slave bought in the cheapest market, with scarce the outlay of a few coppers in the way of smiles and coquetries, was, of course, out of the question—but that he had been so bought, and was still loyal to his mistress, seemed equally obvious.

And here Alban must be revealed to us a very man; he lifted his eyebrows contemptuously, and his next thought was, "What could a woman of Charlotte's capacity find worth her notice in a mere fine, healthy animal like this Rotherham?" It was a question of sex—it could be none other. She admired his hand-

some face and figure ; she put up with his trite common-places. That settled (wrongly, as we know), Alban felt no compunction for robbing her ladyship of her lover, and no doubts of his ability to do so.

The attitude adopted by Rotherham was, however, more dignified and manly, more reserved, he almost felt more resentful, than he anticipated. The young ruler clung to his possessions.

Soho! Rotherham had certainly not retired in sorrow, but he had not yielded, nor shown any signs of yielding, his point. His good-humour over the boys and their hoodwinking of himself proved nothing ; it served to close the conversation more easily than could otherwise have been done ; but as regarded Charlotte, matters stood as they were.

He looked forward with curiosity and impatience to the next move.

It came in due time.

"You understand that I have only myself to blame for what happened at The Island Cottage?" began Rotherham, abruptly, the following afternoon. He, on his part, had done some thinking, quite a creditable amount of thinking for one not given that way, and the outcome was a strengthening of his intuition that, for some reason or other, Charlotte lay under a ban in his companion's mind.

This must not be. He could understand that her views of life would hardly accord with those of an ascetic, and that Sebastian Alban, burning with lofty ideals, and hedged about with severe, unflinching rules of conduct, would have but scanty insight into the requirements of a gentle, domestic—no, hang it! that did not suit Charlotte—a brilliant, charming creature, to whom society, amusement and admiration were as necessary as the air she breathed.

Alban probably despised the necessity ; from his altitude looked down upon the trivialities dear to lesser mortals. "Well, I shall stand up for her," quoth her rejected lover, doggedly. "I am willing to be hauled over the coals myself, and," softening, "very well I may be ; it is wonderful that such a man as Alban should trouble his head over an uninteresting, ordinary chap like me—but I'll set him right about Charlotte"—and the opening remark above recorded was meant to lead up to this desired consummation.

"For what happened at The Island Cottage," repeated Alban, mechanically. "The Island, Cottage? Was that——"

"Miss Sunning's—I mean, Mrs. Sunning's. The little house they took on the river. I thought you knew."

"Not the name. Or, I had not noticed it. And you say—what did you say about something 'taking place' there?"

"I said it was my fault—but nothing did take place, you know."

"So it was your fault that nothing took place," said Alban. "I see. You are like the man who was wont to refer to a certain church as the church he stayed away from."

"Eh? Oh, yes. Yes, that's it exactly ;" but it was plain that the speaker was not greatly enlightened. "What I mean is," continued he, getting back to firmer ground, "that though I misunderstood my position so far as to fancy I had—had a chance—pshaw!—I was on the brink of a proposal, Alban, and fool enough to feel pretty cocksure as to what would be its result, when she—she saved me from it, God bless her! Only a creature all goodness and sweetness would do that. I thought I'd tell you, because it seemed to me," his voice trembling a little, "that you were under a sort of misapprehension."

To tell the truth, I felt all the time you were speaking the other day as if——” he paused.

Alban looked to him to go on.

“As if you didn’t like her somehow. You see, it’s this way,” proceeded Drax, rapidly. “You heard about us two, and I daresay all you heard was right enough. I did—did have a very happy time down there where those boys saw me, and I was sort of dazzled by it; but what looked as if it were a two-handed affair to them, and sounded like one to you, was in reality on my side only. It’s a bit hard to own it, Alban, but it *was* so. You’ll believe me, I suppose. I ought to know. What could any one else know?” his tone rising in querulous protest.

Alban, to whom the whole affair was now as clear as daylight, took his cue on the instant.

“I must own I thought you had been ill-used, Rotherham.” He pressed Rotherham’s arm as he spoke.

“And that made you down upon Char—Miss Sunning?”

“It made me indignant even with her.” He wondered if this would pass.

“That’s what I thought. You were no friend of hers all along. Even before this.”

“Quite so. Even before this.”

“That’s because you don’t know her, Alban.”

“I thought I told you that I had known her all her life, Rotherham.”

“I forgot. It was you who thought *I* didn’t! Well, I can’t think of anything else. Of course,” hesitating, “you may—you mayn’t consider Charlotte a religious woman, though I assure you,” eagerly, “she can talk most beautifully—I wish you only heard her talk about it! And she goes to hear you preach. It was from her I knew you were such a swell. Though I didn’t know

you had ever met. I suppose she may have told me, but I didn't notice it. Anyway, she and her mother sounded your praises one day I was there, and I know something was said, though I can't think what, that showed me Charlotte thought you—thought you——”

“A fashionable preacher,” said Alban, drily.

His companion reddened.

“I see you don't believe me. It doesn't matter what I say.” (“You think you know everything,” muttered he to himself.)

“My dear Rotherham, will you listen to me? Believe me, I do every justice to your veracity—I would add also to a certain measure of sincerity which naturally impressed you on the part of a very, very clever young lady. Don't start away, Rotherham, I mean to be bolder yet. I must, or it is no use my speaking at all. Charlotte Sunning is a strange compound of good and evil; she has abilities of the highest order; she has, at times, a species of honesty, even of integrity, which convicts herself and makes her ruthless in unmasking others; her mother, for instance, who—I really can't trust myself to speak to Mrs. Sunning,” with a quick, fleeting smile; “she is Charlotte's bad angel; always at her side, always whispering in her ear, steadily, perseveringly, unrelaxingly undoing and effacing every impression for good that might, left to itself, be productive of results. Charlotte listens to her mother——”

“Yes, I know. I don't myself care about Mrs. Sunning—much.” It was a relief to break in with this; he felt he must say something, strike a blow in some direction. He was all in a quiver, and to hearken in silence while one so dear—still so dear, though not for him—was being dissected in cold blood was not to be borne.

Alban, however, went steadily on.

“Charlotte listens, and it all sinks in. Recollect that

this has been going on from childhood. Recollect also that there is such a thing as the law of heredity. Charlotte is her mother's daughter. The father was a worthy, stupid man, useless as a parent—you know Lady Henrietta Dimsdale?" breaking off abruptly.

"I have just met her. But of course I know about her."

"Colonel Sunning was her brother, and her duplicate. Excellent, irreproachable, and weak as water. Can you imagine such a person having any counteracting influence over a mind like Charlotte's? She caressed her father and toyed with him—I can see her now sitting on his knee, coaxing permission to do whatever she chose, and invariably obtaining it. Set on by her mother in nine cases out of ten. To be Biblical again, Rotherham, the two often reminded me of Herodias and her daughter. To do Mrs. Sunning justice," continued the speaker, musingly, "she took an infinity of pains about Charlotte's education, health, and all her material interests. The whole trouble and responsibility of these were shifted on to her shoulders, and I have heard my people say—(we are related; I don't know if I told you this)—that though James Sunning's wife was no favourite with any of them, she was doing her part by her only child. It took a long time for any one to discover what a fatal part that was. Am I boring you with all this?"—suddenly.

"No; oh, no!" Rotherham was so deeply interested that he had forgotten everything else. Alban was not only telling him just what he wanted to know, but confirming what he longed to believe. All that had ever seemed to him amiss—and he now knew that he had occasionally and vaguely felt there were things amiss—things which required to be explained away by an experienced and comprehensive

mind—(of course *he* knew ; he had not been in India for nothing)—could now be comfortably laid at the door of another ; and the more Alban expanded on this head, the better he was pleased.

"I don't need to tell you that Charlotte's mother is a clever, sensible, accomplished woman," proceeded Alban, picking his words deliberately. "You may consider this an eulogium, and wonder at my passing it upon a person about whom you and I have the same opinion, but I am ready to defend every adjective."

"Oh, I know she's clever. By Jove! those drawings of hers! And she was so quick over them, too. Even Charlotte used to be astonished."

"As I say, accomplished. She is a fair musician, too. And——"

"Charlotte plays splendidly. Have you ever heard her? But I did not know Mrs. Sunning did."

"Mrs. Sunning effaces herself with the true maternal instinct whenever she can. If Charlotte could draw, her mother's performances would not be *en évidence*. But Charlotte missed that talent."

"She knows about it, though. Mrs. Sunning always takes her suggestions. Once we were all picnicing beside a mill-dam—such a jolly old mill, with its great black wheel ; and Mrs. Sunning had made a wonderful sketch of it—I should never have seen it wasn't splendid all through, but Charlotte was down upon something, I forget what, and her mother made her stop where she was and watch every stroke she put in, till it was right. What a day that was!" musing.

"I see you love to recall it," said Alban, quietly ; "it makes me feel rather cruel to go on with my disillusioning process ; shall I leave off?"

"No!" He passed his hand across his brow. "No. It's over now, anyway. I forgot for the moment ; some-

thing took me back, and—but go on. Sorry I interrupted."

"I thought you might wonder why I called Mrs. Sunning 'sensible'? At any rate, I wish to take up my thread at that point—forgive a preacher, Rotherham; there is no baulking him of his determination to be heard, once he has made up his argument and pleased himself with it. I call the most cunning, scheming, intriguing, the most sensual, hypocritical, altogether vicious and villainous—what a word!" laughing; "but I had to have some word ending in 'ous'—I call this objectionable compound of vices 'sensible,' because she knew what she wanted in Charlotte, and pursued the means to attain her end in a way that ensured it. You have admired Charlotte's superb health, and complexion, and figure? Credit her mother with these; first with bestowing them on her, and then with preserving them to her. It was a sight to see—Charlotte in the old days. Her running was that of a young deer, and there was nothing she couldn't do in the gymnastic line. Her clothes were as loose upon her as a boy's. She was out in all weathers, her hair flying wild, and the rain pouring off her hats—and all her mother did was to see that she didn't sit in her wet things after she came in. I have this from Lady Henrietta, who, by the way, thought it not at all the thing—but my mother pronounced the word 'sensible,' and I endorse it. Charlotte doesn't know what it is to be anæmic and languid and tired, with nothing, as half her London acquaintances are. She goes through days and nights on end that would kill them off like so many nine-pins. Her life is one long burst of pleasure."

"Well, why shouldn't it be?" said Drax, argumentatively. His eyes had glistened during the recital; he had seemed to see Charlotte herself in very deed,

glowing and blooming before his eyes. "Isn't that right anyway?" murmured he.

"You can hardly expect me, a minister of the Gospel, to think so, Rotherham." A text had risen in Alban's mind, but he would not quote it; he rather disliked quoting Scripture; and, moreover, while Charlotte's image was still so ardently cherished in the mind of her discarded swain, of what use would it be to remind him of St. Paul's denunciation?

As it was Rotherham was taken aback.

"Oh, I say, I forgot. Sorry, Alban. Of course it isn't right and all that from your point of view, but you spoke so like other people just now, so jolly well as if you admired Charlotte, that—but I didn't mean that a woman ought to be always on the gad—no, no!" thinking of poor Pennington and his wife. "No, no!" repeated Drax, shaking his head profoundly.

Alban could scarce forbear laughing. He would have liked to take the big man by the shoulders and say, "Can't you see? Can't I show you the insane folly of your thirsting after that torrent which would bear you, a poor piece of helpless driftwood, whithersoever it chose, and finally dash you to pieces upon the rocks?" He maintained his gravity however, gravity being the order of the day.

"You really seemed to admire Charlotte," repeated Rotherham, smoking pensively.

"I do—I do admire her; physically there is no one I admire so much; I will go still further and add, mentally and intellectually also. That artificially developed creature, that Mayfair butterfly, can grasp ideas and follow a sequence of thought in a way that makes talking to her a keen pleasure. I do not often indulge in it."

"Perhaps if you did?" hinted Rotherham.

"Well?" said Alban, drily.

"You might——"

"Might?"

"Do her justice."

"In what have I not done her justice, Rotherham?"

"You have me there," said Rotherham, pausing to smile at himself. "You have described her as I couldn't have done, as I shouldn't have known how to do; though I *felt* it, you know. But look here," suddenly, "what I can't understand is how you come to know all this? You are hard enough worked yourself, how have you the time or the what-d'ye-call-it to be taking in what other people are doing? Except, of course, those you see a great deal of. You said you did not see much of the Sunnings."

"Every now and then I call. Also on the Dimsdales. Also on other relations, friends, and parishioners. Everywhere I hear of Charlotte."

"I had no idea she was such a—so well known."

Alban looked at him, and thought he had said enough for the present.

One day he drew his friend on to speak of his home and family, it having occurred to him to wonder what those could be like from which sprang such a product as Drax Rotherham. He came to the conclusion that they had no hand in the matter.

Inquiries especially directed towards one point in particular elicited the fact that there was no feminine influence strong enough in the home circle to be brought to bear at this juncture. The sisters were too young and adoring; obviously thought all the big brother did was right; and he owned he only confided as much of his own affairs as was good for them to know. He had thought that perhaps Charlotte?—— Here there was a halt and a momentary hesitation.

"Would have been a desirable daughter-in-law and sister-in-law?" suggested Alban, meaningly.

"Well, I did. I did think so. My sisters want some one of that kind to take them in hand. I am no good to them. My father is no good to any of us. If I were to marry—but what's the use of talking, it only sets me thinking about it," and with a fretful air he turned away.

"It seems I get no further," said Alban, to himself. He could not have believed that Rotherham would prove so tough; but on reflection attributed a good deal of his tenacity to the fact that he had for the first time in his life come under the spell not of love alone but of feminine companionship. If Charlotte could charm a jaded man of the world such as Lord Tarporley, a booby squire such as Sir George Tregillis, a celibate like himself—"for I never denied her charm," thought he)—how much more complete and absolute must have been the surrender of this virgin heart when not merely that wondrous being herself, but all womanhood revealed itself in her? No wonder Drax Rotherham had been intoxicated, and was still stupidly sodden.

"But he *shall* wake up," resolved Alban.

It was intolerable to him that he could not with all his tact, forbearance, and persuasive ability, succeed in shaking the goddess on her pedestal. It raised his opinion of Rotherham, but it lowered him in his own. He had no mind to be beaten, he who was never beaten—in the long run.

It may be asked why, with the opinion he had of Charlotte Sunning, Alban, whose friendship with Sir George Tregillis was of long standing, said no word to deter that worthy fellow from precipitating himself at her feet, while he took such pains to open the eyes of Drax Rotherham, whom he had only known a week or

two? The answer is simple. Alban had so often heard Tregillis dilate on Miss Sunning's attractions in the easy manner of an admirer who would never pass beyond admiration pitch, that for once his keen understanding was at fault and he failed to scent danger—and this blindness, we may add, prevented future disclosures, and was a source of comfort to both in days to come.

To return to Rotherham. The time was now at hand when he must return home to take up again his daily life; and, strange to say, his four weeks' absence, with all its changes of scene and novelties of experience (for he had never been in any part of the Continent before), left him, in one respect, pretty much as he was when he quitted England. On the subject of Charlotte he was invulnerable.

Not that he was always thinking of her, nor even that he thought of her often; but directly her name was mentioned a stubborn look would come over his face, which warned the speaker to beware. Alban's word on every other subject was law; Alban's company delightful—he was proud to be asked in hotel-rooms and smoking-rooms who his friend was, and to hear the response 'Sure he was Somebody' from an audience who had hung on Alban's lips the night before.

Alban was sociable, and liked to talk. It may have been that he found going about with his present fellow-traveller rather too much like being in charge of a child, and could not resist embracing such opportunities as offered for other intercourse; at all events he now and then let himself go in a manner that delighted Rotherham, who did not in the least expect to understand what it meant. The very words used by Alban when he fell in with a kindred spirit, and the two fired off at each other as if ignited by the same spark, were enigmatical to him.

Alban appealed to him once, and he blushed like a schoolboy.

"I—I say!" he stammered. And then he smiled into their faces, "I haven't the slightest idea what you fellows are talking about."

"My friend is a practical man," said Alban, carrying off the situation with an easy motion of his head, "he leaves dry, theological problems to others." And the next minute he spoke to Rotherham about something he could understand, and the learned University gentleman never found out that Mr. Alban's companion was not quite clever in his own way.

The last day came, and it was a wet one. The weather hitherto had been magnificent, and Alban had ruthlessly stuffed the letters and papers which awaited him at every point into his pocket, bag, or the nearest receptacle handy; but as he looked out upon the sweeping mists and streaming gutters from the window of the Hôtel Victoria at Interlaken, he drew forth a huge budget, and subsided behind a writing-table philosophically.

Rotherham was thus left to his own resources. He got along as he could; read a little, smoked a good deal, surveyed the landscape from the hall door at intervals, and held desultory conversations with others forlorn as himself.

There were, however, but few people in the hotel—the season being over, and many of the rooms already shut up. He felt, on the whole, glad to be going home.

And he felt gladder still of one thing; when he came to remember it, late in the afternoon, he had not thought of Charlotte the whole day. He would go back cured, and yet steadfast; his opinion of her unshaken, but with no desire to meet again, nor the least intention of enshrining her in his heart as anything but a memory.

"Let us go out," said Alban, at his elbow. The sky had cleared, and the air was fresh and chill. In a few minutes the two set forth.

"Well, we have had a good time," said Alban, pacing along cheerily beneath the walnut trees; "considering the time of year, we have been lucky in our weather; and, for my part, I shall always remember in future to come to Switzerland after the rush is over. None of the scrambling for seats and rooms—none of the cool indifference of hotel managers and porters—we have had it all our own way, eh, Rotherham? I hope you feel as I do, that our trip has been a success?"

Rotherham assented cordially.

"And as for the amalgamation," continued his friend, in the same cheerful accents, "it has worked—shall we mutually say it has worked to admiration?"

"You know how *I* feel about it, Alban." A pleasant, grateful look.

"The only point as to which we have not been *quite* in accord," continued Alban—he felt his companion's arm stiffen, he was sure of it, but ran on smoothly—"the one apple of discord which has just served to give us something to nibble at from opposite sides, has been——"

"I would rather you didn't speak of her," said Rotherham; "if you will forgive my interrupting you? About Charlotte Sunning I don't—I can't—I can never agree with you. Hadn't we better decide to let each other alone? I mean no offence"—in some trepidation lest his boldness should be resented. "I appreciate your motives and—and your kind interest; but there *are* things——"

"Which a man must settle for himself," supplied Alban.

"Yes, that's it."

Alban thought a moment, and came to a decision.

"Rotherham, my dear fellow, I want you to promise me one thing. I shall obey your wish in this matter—you have the right to dictate, and you need not fear that I shall again transgress—but if at any time, under any circumstances, you yourself desire to break through this silence, will you come to me and without hesitation speak? I shall understand. Will you?"

The 'Will you?' breathed an earnestness that thrilled through his hearer. He started, confused and agitated.

"Oh, thank you. Yes. Yes, I could do that. But it isn't likely, you know."

"I am not so sure of that," quoth Alban to himself; and in the pause that ensued, he muttered beneath his breath, "A cat and mouse game. She will have him again."

CHAPTER X.

"A HOUSE IN CARLTON HOUSE TERRACE IS NOT TO BE HAD FOR NOTHING."

WINTER was over ; it had been a prolonged and dreary one ; frost, and fog, and cold spring winds had succeeded each other with tiresome regularity—but at last even those adverse influences had died away, and the gay world of London, awakening from its slumbers, yawned, stretched itself, blinked its thousand eyes, and started into life and activity at a bound.

During the past month the personages with whom these pages are concerned had seen little or nothing of each other, and only one event worth recording had happened, whereof more anon ; but with the magic month of May we find, or are about to find, them all again to the front, and that being the case, who knows what may happen ?

In Sir Herbert Dimsdale's house the bustle of arrival prevailed, for the family had remained in the country longer than usual, owing to circumstances which have no concern for us—and Paterfamilias, who had had to be up in solitary discomfort at the beck of his Parliamentary whip till he was sick of his own society—being a domestic man—beheld at length the blinds of his drawing-room windows drawn up, carriages and carts at his door, and the portly form of his Henrietta here, there, and everywhere within. "Ha!" cried he, and rubbed his hands. He would not have exchanged that sight for any other in Christendom.

Apart from this, it was pleasant to have the large dining-room again in use; he could eat his mutton chop at luncheon with better appetite when seasoned by the lively rattle and prattle of companionship, than when it had to be consumed in a little back den all by himself; the servants too, confound them! were a vast deal more attentive when her ladyship's eye was upon them; there would be no more tepid shaving-water and weak, thin, after-dinner coffee—at both of which grievances he had secretly repined but made no complaint, such being his way.

Before Lady Henrietta had been half-an-hour in the house she had heard and promised to remedy all that was wrong—and here it may be mentioned that in the thick of the turmoil and the thousand-and-one claims on her attention she did not forget (which shows the sort of wife a woman ought to be)—so that cheerful content sat on every brow in the great mansion in Seamore Place—a fact we love to record, such facts being rare, as we all know.

“Well, Kitty, I suppose you are glad to be up?” quoth Kitty's father, for Kitty's face was not the least beaming of the group. “London suits your book, eh? And George, you aren't sorry to have done with Oxford and see what a ‘season’ is like, before you start on your travels? Take it easy, my boy, it'll bang you to pieces if you don't. How are the ponies, girls?” to the younger ones. “We'll have a canter to-morrow morning. Miss Forster,” addressing the governess, who was also present at the tea hour on this first occasion, “I hope you will approve of your London schoolroom. Well, I am very glad to have you all about me again,” concluded the kindly gentleman, with a comprehensive glance round.

Lady Henrietta untied her bonnet-strings, took her seat at the tea-table, and proceeded to pour from the

massive teapot. Plates of good things were attacked by the others, and the little girls, on their best behaviour, anxiously plied Miss Forster, who sat still upon an ottoman, doing manners. To have tea in the drawing-room on the 'Journey day' was an institution to which Sybil and Clara looked forward every year with undiminished zest, but Miss Forster had not hitherto been inducted into its mysteries; wherefore it behoved them to support her.

"Father, go and talk to her, won't you," whispered little Clara.

The good-natured Sir Herbert had just complied, and was stirring his cup, while the lady sipped from hers—Lady Henrietta was replenishing the pot from the great silver urn, and spilling the water, as her eyes were drawn towards a pile of notes and cards by the side of the tray—Kitty and George were tearing off wrappers from a tailor's parcel which a footman had brought in for the latter, good little Kitty feigning even more interest than she felt, for was it not George's first frock-coat?—and all were in the happiest state of unrestraint, eagerness, and excitement, when the door was suddenly thrown open, and ere the merry din could subside or any one be distinctly aware of what was happening, a radiant apparition burst upon the eyes of all, at sight of which with one accord every voice exclaimed, "Charlotte!"

Charlotte it was, in silk and lace, rustling and shimmering from head to foot; everything she had on representing to the feminine eye unfathomable gulfs of expense, and unscaleable heights of fashion.

Mauve was the colour of the year, and its delicate shades were peculiarly suited to Charlotte's style of beauty; the curling ostrich plumes which hung over the brim of her hat seemed to lend their own hue to her

clear, liquid eyes, and the ribbons and soft ruchings at her throat to reflect it yet again. Gloves and parasol matched; she was freshly and exquisitely equipped at every point.

"And we at our very worst!" groaned poor Kitty, in an agony of vexation. For the children looked tumbled and frowsy and overheated in their old winter frocks; while she and her mother had been running about ever since luncheon—having preceded the school-room party and borne the brunt of unpacking and arranging—so that Lady Henrietta's bonnet was awry, and her grey locks beneath it straggling; while Kitty herself had a smear on her chin, as a glance at the mirror now informed her.

She might have had a dozen if only her cousin had kept away. Charlotte's radiant perfection seemed a very insult at that moment, her smiles and greetings covert taunts.

And how dreadful the room looked—all papers and boxes. There were gloves and neckties and two little common-looking outdoor jackets right in the line of the newcomer's eye, where Sybil and Clara had plumped them down in their joyous hilarity, secure that nothing would be said that day. There was Kitty's own hat and veil, with the pins sticking out; and an open handbag, whose contents bubbled over; and *Home Chat*, which she had bought to read on the journey, obtruding its vulgar pages as a concomitant of that particular group! There was even the prim Miss Forster's neat cloak and reticule—but they did not look neat, displaced by Sir Herbert in his anxiety to do the civil to his children's governess—and, worst of all, there was George's contribution, in itself sufficient to make in any room a centre of disgusting disorderliness!

"My dear people, how are you all?" cried Charlotte.

“Oh!” cried aunt Hen, in return, trying to think how glad she was.

“Why, Charlotte!” exclaimed Sir Herbert, starting up.

“Take care! Don’t come to grief in all this litter,” followed Kitty, kissing her cousin, while George hurriedly bore off the coat—unseen, he hoped.

Miss Forster alone sat still enjoying the scene, pleased to be found by a smart visitor forming one of the family party.

“Well, and so you are come at last,” quoth the young lady, in her brightest tones. “Yes, please, aunt Hen, some tea. My first tea to-day; I thought I should catch you at it if I came early. Mother’s somewhere else. Oh, she’s all right again, thanks; and had a good time abroad. We clattered about up and down the Riviera, and got back a fortnight ago.”

“You are looking well, Charlotte,” from her uncle.

“That’s my style, dear uncle. I’m no good otherwise. Mother was quite a picture after her illness”—(“A good illness, not to be wasted,” thought she)—“but the delicate line doesn’t suit me, even with ‘rose-coloured curtains for the doctor,’”—looking round, but no one appreciated the quotation.

“And you are settled for the season?” said Lady Henrietta, still somewhat flustered, but doing her best to hide it. “Sybil, cut some cake for your cousin. You see a difference in her and Clara, don’t you, Charlotte?” as the little girl silently did as she was bid. “They always have tea with us on the first day; it is a time-honoured custom.”

“You great, tall thing, cut me a bigger piece than that,” laughed Charlotte, shaking her head at the refined morsel.

“Greedy pig!” muttered Sybil.

Charlotte was no favourite with her and Clara, and she had now come to spoil everything, and rob their great event of all its glory; it was a shame.

There was their father, who a minute before had been sitting placidly by Miss Forster's side, putting her into the best of humours—now, he turned his back upon her, unconsciously, but still he did—while eyes and ears were all for that dressed-up doll! There was their mother, forgetting that Clara had no tea, forgetting indeed to drink her own, while talking silly talk, because she was obliged to talk it when grown-ups came in. There were all the rest sitting round like mice, staring and listening. They themselves were ready to cry with disappointment and resentment, especially when before long Lady Henrietta, seeing them mute and inactive, suggested, "Now, my dears, don't you think you would like to go upstairs and show Miss Forster her room and the schoolroom?"—and the trio had to retire before poor little Clara, generally bold enough, but now utterly subdued, had half satisfied the appetite of thirteen.

Outside the door: "That's the cousin we hate," she indemnified herself by saying to Miss Forster. But Miss Forster thought Charlotte a very charming young lady indeed.

A winter of variety and gaiety in foreign resorts had obliterated all that she did not desire to remember from Charlotte's mind. She thought, when she thought at all, of Drax Rotherham as of a man from whom she had had an escape—an honourable escape. He had been wounded—that was as it should be; but no one, not even he himself guessed that she was not scatheless. It had been a near thing; she must take better care in future; but as it was, no harm had been done.

As for Sir George Tregillis, he might have suited her, but she could do as well, or better yet. An Italian

marquis had been very attentive during her sojourn in Rome, and if his estates had been as good as his title she would not have minded his nationality. Those being questionable, patriotism prevailed.

She had, however, danced and flirted, and made acquaintances by the score, some of whom might prove useful afterwards; generally speaking she had been amused, and was now ready for London again, her beauty undiminished, and her health and spirits equal to anything.

When she rose to take leave of her relatives:—

"We shall be all in a rush directly," said she, "but you know our ways. Come when you can"—and thus got off without any definite invitation.

"There, mum, I've done the Henny-Pennys for you," cried she, on her return home; "found the good folks just arrived, and grovelling over a schoolroom tea. So I sat it out, and you won't need to call till you choose."

"Dear me! are they come so soon, Charlotte?"

"Soon? They're late. I suggested we had been pining for the light of their countenances, counting the days till the family reunion should take place. So don't you go and undo the effect by any talk about 'Soon'."

"If only they were not quite so near!"

"Can't help that. They were here before us."

"And I shall have aunt Hen looking in on Sundays to take me to hear Alban preach, and really I do *not* care to go out on Sunday evenings," murmured Mrs. Sunning, plaintively. "I would almost sooner go with her on a week day. What with all your visitors, and they never go till the church bells are ringing——"

"Not always then. However, I'll clear them out for you. I don't care to stop at home on Sunday evenings. My visitors who fag you out have an exhilarating effect

on me. So I'll cry 'Shoo!' at six o'clock, if you please. I don't care if I go with Henny-Penny myself sometimes, if nothing better offers. Alban is worth listening to, and I could knock off the morning service. Do you know that he called the other day?" she added.

"I know he did. I was going to tell you. I wondered if you noticed his card."

"Oh, I did, and told Henny. I thought it would impress her."

"Yes. I daresay he does not often pay her that compliment," said Mrs. Sunning, complacently. "What did she say?"

"Something or other. Look here, mum, I have an idea." Charlotte, who had been reflecting for a moment, looked up and ran on, "Let's cultivate the saintly Alban. As it is, he rather likes us; he is drawn to us in spite of himself. His disapproving conscience says 'Keep away from those worldly women,' but his baser self replies 'Shut up,' and he comes and calls. It really is rather wonderful his calling so early in the day. Shall I write a nice little note, saying how sorry we were to miss him, and ask him to—to what?"

"Dine *very* quietly. We are not supposed to give dinners, but we might have one or two others—we should have to pick them carefully, Charlotte, and of course we can't have Sir George Tregillis, who would have done so well otherwise——"

"Those aren't the kind," interrupted Charlotte, laughing. "My dear mum, what earthly good would it be to have a dinner for Alban, and only George Tregillis to meet him? We must ask—let me see—people we want to impress, people who will go away and talk about it, who will think the more of us for it——"

"The Dimsdales?"

"No, no! They can be turned off cheaper than that."

We need only tell them he's been. The people I mean are those we *can't* tell; we can't go about proclaiming it from the house-tops; if they saw him walk in, and saw us quite at home with him, it might send up our credit, especially if we made no fuss. I think it would be worth trying."

"I know he is difficult to get, Charlotte. Henrietta told me they had given up asking him."

Charlotte smiled and seated herself at her desk.

"Oh, *you* are going to write. Of course he is only a young man, but still in his position and a Churchman too—I really think I had better——"

"If you do, you will fare like the revered Henrietta."

"Nonsense!"

"Try then," said Charlotte, suddenly jumping up; "try, if you like. I tell you, if you do, he won't come—but if you leave it to me I could *make* him come. He disapproves of us both, but—however, you try."

In the end, however, Mrs. Sunning did not try.

"This will do," said Alban to himself, as he perused the note. "Just what I hoped for. I don't think they can have heard yet; and in the course of the evening I should easily be able to find an opportunity of slipping it in. What night can I go? Let me see"—and he consulted a note-book. Charlotte had allowed him to choose his own night.

The matter settled, he forgot it in the multiplicity of other interests, until the morning of the dinner-party. It then occurred to him that he might as well see Drax Rotherham first.

Should he call at Rotherham's office? No. His own affairs as well as those of a business man precluded morning calls except on matters of importance, and what he had to say to his friend, or to gather from him, must be edged in sideways, not approached openly. He con-

cluded to be passing Carlton House Terrace late in the afternoon.

But what has Carlton House Terrace to do with a man whom we left vibrating between a city office and a suburban villa? We mentioned that there had happened one event worth recording in respect to our *dramatis personæ* since they last figured in these pages, and this event explains the above.

It will be remembered that Drax Rotherham had obtained a berth in a wealthy mercantile house while yet a lad, owing to a long-standing friendship between his father and one of the partners. Nothing more has been said of this tie, because up to within a few months of the present time it did no more for the Rotherham family than provide a decent means of maintenance, with some claim upon the future; but shortly after Drax returned from his holiday a great upheaval took place. Mr. Burnett died, and to the amazement of everybody it was found that he had made the young man his heir.

"They tell me I am to have everything," said Drax, on his return home after a lawyer's interview; "the house and furniture, as well as the money and partnership. The only stipulation is that I am—that we are," he corrected himself, "to live in the house, and keep together the collections of books, and pictures, and china. Nothing is to be changed."

We will pass over scenes and conversations which all can imagine, and which are now six months old; we will not even inquire whether Drax Rotherham in his new-found dignity cast a thought backwards on a certain summer evening which might have ended differently had he been then what he was now—and we will only assure our readers that whether or no this query presented itself in the first rush of new feelings and emotions, it certainly had no place in our young man's mind at the

present time. It was not Rotherham, but his friend, Sebastian Alban, whose heart misgave him when one day he caught a glimpse of a beautiful face, and realised that Miss Charlotte Sunning had returned to Town.

What would Charlotte think? How would she act? That she had first led Rotherham on, and then heartlessly thrown him over, was clear to Alban's mind; the trouble was would she now consider him worth recapturing, and, if so, what was to prevent her accomplishing this?

For Rotherham, open-hearted, tractable, persuadable on every other point, maintained the attitude he had from the first laid down for himself as regarded Charlotte. He never mentioned her; apparently he enjoyed his life without her; had there been no prospect of a meeting between the two, Alban would have been satisfied and given no further thought to the matter, but he could not contemplate a renewal of influence adverse in all respects to his own without foreboding disaster. "It would be his ruin," muttered he.

One day he met his friend Tregillis.

"I suppose you know Miss Sunning is in Town?"

"Miss Sunning?" said Tregillis, absently.

"Oh!" said Alban, laughing.

"I tell you what," said Tregillis, reddening a little, "I don't care if I do tell you, Alban, that girl is—isn't what I thought her. I shan't trouble to call."

"Have you called on the Rotherhams lately?"

"I am going there now," said Tregillis.

"Oh!" said Alban again, thoughtfully this time. He was wondering whether anything could be done to enlist George Tregillis' aid. He came to the conclusion that something might—some day.

But at present he had only himself to trust to; a blunder might be fatal, and he alone would not blunder;

yet he felt strangely powerless. It ended in his resolving at any rate to be the first to tell Charlotte, after which he would shape his course as circumstances dictated; and at this point we find him wending his way to Carlton House Terrace.

As he stood on the doorstep he looked up. If only it were not such a noble looking mansion, so unquestionably the abode of wealth and prosperity! If only Drax Rotherham had kept out of sight and sound! Not obtruded his change of fortune on the world's eye. It was not his fault, of course. He could have done none other than he did; but, as things were, Charlotte would not only see for herself but probably exaggerate the immensity of the transition. Alban frowned and sighed as he stepped within.

And within there was a great square hall, a marble staircase, soft carpets, massive doorways; his quick glance took in afresh the luxury, the magnificence, the perfection of it all—and his name had been twice pronounced from below, ere it stayed his steps as he followed the footman upstairs, so lost was he in his own thoughts.

"Come in here, won't you?" said Rotherham, holding open the door of a room whence he had emerged. "You are the very man I want. Tell me if this is a good thing to give to," taking up a paper which proved to be an appeal for a charity. "I am so bewildered among these, there are such thousands of them, that I am afraid I let the half lie unanswered. But Mr. Burnett supported this."

"Your father might look into them," suggested Alban.

"My father is less able to look into anything every day. He will not long be with us, I fear. The doctor is with him now."

An idea of which he was half ashamed darted into Alban's mind. He scarcely knew Mr. Rotherham senior

—a good old man, no doubt, but as a factor in human affairs so valueless that if he would only die at this juncture, or, better still, if he would keep dying for some little time, it would be doing more for his son's welfare than he would ever do by other means. The Rotherhams in seclusion and in mourning might be suppressed : Charlotte might never hear of them.

He was debating beneath a decorous exterior the possibilities of the case, when Rotherham, to whom his absent-mindedness was more apparent than he supposed, put a sudden conclusion to it by remarking in a matter-of-fact tone :—

"I saw Miss Sunning to-day," and adding with a smile, "you are thinking of her at this moment, Alban."

"My dear fellow, I was." But Alban was undeniably taken aback. "How on earth did you know?"

"Saw there was something, and hit upon it by a fluke. Oh, yes; I saw Miss Sunning, and was ready with my bow—but she didn't see me. Alban, you can't think I should be such a fatuous ass as to be still——"

"No, no! Oh, dear, no!" said Alban, hastily.

"A man doesn't go on caring for a woman who doesn't care for him," said Rotherham, with a little air of dignity. "When I was abroad with you in the autumn it was all fresh, and I was still smarting, as you know. I daresay I was touchy on the subject. But that's past. We all get over these things."

"To be sure. Certainly. Especially when you have come to see, as no doubt you have, that it would be—would have been," he corrected himself, "an unfortunate—— Oh yes, yes. Let bygones be bygones. You are not likely to meet, and——"

"And if we do, it's no matter, you know."

"Not in the least. Are your sisters at home?"

He went upstairs presently and saw them, stayed a

proper time, and came away mentally reflecting that he might have spared himself the trouble of calling on the Sunnings, and would certainly not mention Rotherham's name that evening.

He was talking away on other topics, and dinner was nearly over, when, as ill luck would have it, the elderly man on his hostess's left hand—none other than the Colonel Blake with whom we exchanged a glance in the early days of our story—casting about in his mind for some suitable topic wherewith to accost the guest of honour—a clergyman being always a formidable personage, to whom it was as well to be civil, on the principle of holding a candle to the devil)—Blake, we say, recollecting that he had seen Mr. Alban at the Sports' Club on an occasion when he chanced to be taking refuge there, his own club being closed, recalled also that Alban had been in the company of Sir George Tregillis and an unknown individual of whom he had heard an odd thing later on.

Such trifles, we have already hinted, made up the sum of the Colonel's life.

He had never again been within the doors of the strange domain; but he retained an acute recollection of its coolness and pleasantness on the September afternoon when, being at a loose end, he was thankful to accept a stray proffer of hospitality, and on his next encountering Tregillis spoke of it.

"Oh, ah, yes. Rotherham took me in," said Sir George.

"Who is Rotherham?" demanded the Colonel, with all the interest of a gossip.

"Who he *was* and who he *is* are two different people," replied Sir George. "He has come in for the most extraordinary piece of luck since you saw him with Alban and me that day," and he poured forth.

Rotherham had been seen with him, he was looked upon as Rotherham's friend, it behoved him to let the tale lose nothing in the telling—wherefore it now rose to mind as the very opening Colonel Blake required, and accordingly he looked across the table in a pause of the conversation.

"You are a friend of a friend of mine, I think, Mr. Alban—Sir George Tregillis. I saw you with him and that lucky fellow Rotherham, one day. Astonishing luck of Rotherham's, is it not?"

It was but a small table; there were only ten people present, and the speaker had, as we say, waited for a pause.

"What is that about Mr. Rotherham?" came Charlotte's voice, clear and quick from the other end. "Is it *our* Mr. Rotherham, I wonder? What 'luck' are you talking of, Colonel Blake?"

("Now, how will she take it?" thought Alban.)

He was not obliged to speak, Charlotte saved him the necessity of replying further than by a nod across the way, and he could look with easy unconcern from one to the other while Drax Rotherham's name passed from lip to lip. For the second time that day he was to have his mind relieved and his fears set at rest.

"I do think it is splendid," cried Charlotte, enthusiastically. "The dear, good fellow! Mother, you remember how nice he was? We had him down at the cottage where we were vegetating when mother had her accident," explained she to the table generally; "we found the poor man a perfect wreck, left high and dry on the beach, all his belongings having deserted him. Alone in London! Oh, the pathos of it!" with a merry laugh.

"Who wouldn't wish to be 'Alone in London' to be

taken pity upon by Miss Charlotte Sunning?" cried the Colonel, with a gallant bow.

"Ah, but with you 'to roam along the world's tired denizen' isn't solitude," responded Charlotte, shaking her head at him. "You roam from club to club, quite content if you but find their portals open, and no painters' ladders blocking the way; whereas 'to sit on rocks and muse o'er flood and fell' would bore you to death. Poor Drax Rotherham loved the country, and was chained to the town."

"He can have as much country as he chooses now, at any rate," responded the Colonel, somewhat nettled. "By what I hear, he will never stand in need of your good offices again. A magnificent house in Carlton House Terrace," looking at Alban, "drives his phaeton and pair of high steppers, and means to get into Parliament—eh, is it not so? You know better than I, of course; for Tregillis told me you went abroad with Rotherham soon after I saw you..."

"Why did you never tell *me* this?" said Charlotte, beckoning Alban to her side, as he entered the drawing-room on the re-assembling of the party.

"This?" said he, seating himself.

"About Mr. Rotherham. You knew we knew him. You must have talked about us, you and he—yet you never mentioned his name to me?"

"When have I seen you to mention it? I only made Rotherham's acquaintance in the autumn. I have never met you since."

"You did not know him when we did, last summer?"

"No."

"That explains it," said Charlotte, lightly. "I fancied you had. Mr. Rotherham was rather an admirer of mine. Nothing serious, you know. Did he ever say anything?"

"About you? Certainly. He told me of your kindness to him in the summer."

"And?——"

Alban looked at her, smiling, waiting for more. She played with her fan, picking the feathers each from each.

"Of course he did the usual thing; took a fancy to me, and—and I was rather sorry about it. But I daresay he has forgotten my very name by this time. Is it true what that man said at dinner, that he has become a millionaire?"

"Not at all true." He fancied a change in her face. "Grossly exaggerated, as such reports always are. I saw Rotherham to-day. I know him very well now, and can satisfy your curiosity upon any point."

"Well, do." But his cheerful alacrity puzzled and annoyed her. She wanted him to be disconcerted, mysterious, stimulating.

"Rotherham has come in for a good thing. Colonel Blake's story is not without foundation, but he piled it up when he had the chance of an audience. To call Rotherham a millionaire is ridiculous."

"A house in Carlton House Terrace is not to be had for nothing," said she, significantly.

"He is obliged to live there by the terms of the testator's will; otherwise, I don't imagine he would have chosen to do so. His tastes are simple."

"Oh, very," with a laugh.

"And he cares little for society. He will never be a man of fashion. May I say that I am glad of this? Rotherham has a higher ideal; he is living a consistent Christian life; he has all his family about him——"

"Ah!" she pulled a wry face.

"And when I was there a few hours ago," pursued Alban, steadily, "it was a pleasant picture that met my eye; a picture of a good man on whom Fortune had

smiled, and who, all unspoilt, is desirous of using his wealth——”

“This is not the pulpit, dear Mr. Alban,” an arch look and smile; “you and I are just talking nicely together, and I don’t in the least want to know how Mr. Drax Rotherham is using his wealth. He was always a most virtuous being. But tell me, does he—is he—are all those terrible relations—they seemed endless when he spoke about them—are they forever going to hang round his neck, and does he not seem even to want to shake them off? What nonsense asking this, however. Of course he doesn’t say so, he is far too proper. Only once—things were different,” she breathed a sigh and stole a glance.

Alban, however, was resolved to take no notice.

“I can only tell you that Rotherham seems gloriously content, and in the best of spirits. He is full of plans and projects. His young brothers——”

“They have got to be provided for, I suppose?”

“They have gone to better schools. Hal, the eldest, to Wellington——”

“Oh, *don’t* tell me about them. I really don’t take enough interest—though I liked the man himself. And I am so glad to hear he is flourishing. I was afraid at one time I had, quite unintentionally of course, been so unfortunate as to cause him a little disappointment. *That* is why I care at all, don’t you understand?”

“You want to be told that he has recovered from the blow?” said Alban. “Well, I can give you my assurance that he has;” mentally recapitulating the afternoon’s scene. “It is wonderful, I grant you, Charlotte——”

“That’s right. You haven’t called me ‘Charlotte’ for ages.”

“It slipped out; but I own I never think of you as anything else. Do you mind?”

"I like it. Go on about Drax Rotherham." She was looking at him quite simply and seriously now, her mock hilarity, her disfiguring artificiality had died away, there was even a little tremor in her voice; he hesitated, wondering could he, should he, dare to yield to the softer emotions it evoked?

"I know you don't approve of me, Sebastian."

He started. 'Sebastian' was still seldomer heard than 'Charlotte'.

"We used to call each other by our names," murmured she, faintly smiling. "You know we are sort of relations, as well as boy and girl allies of olden times. And you are not so very much older than I, though you pretend to be. But you have floated away from us all into the heavenly empyrean, and we feel afraid of you. If you would only be a little more human, Sebastian—as you are now"—(for he was looking abashed and shamefaced)—"you might reach down to us and pull us up to you. In time. We should take time, but we're not *all* bad——"

"Charlotte!" Her mother's voice. Mrs. Sunning considered that this conversation in a corner had been going on long enough, for what was the use of having all the trouble and expense of a dinner-party, if the person round whom its interest centred hid himself from public view? It was not as if any one could suppose the saintly Alban to be one of Charlotte's men. Anything of that sort was so palpably out of the question that she called 'Charlotte!' in her briskest accents, and Charlotte, not perhaps indisposed to cut short her *tête-à-tête* at this point, rose directly.

Mrs. Sunning wanted music; Lady Jane Beamish would sing if any one could accompany her; a very simple accompaniment—she looked interrogatively at

her daughter, who, after a glance, seated herself at the piano.

Very simple indeed the song proved to be. Alban, who was passionately fond of music, remained at a distance, silent and enduring—but by-and-bye when, after two or three other equally ineffective performances, Charlotte herself began a low, dreamy prelude which gradually rose in power and of which every note was rendered with the precision and intelligence of the true musician, he drew nearer, and leaning his cheek upon his hand, listened intently.

At its close :—

“Go on ; do go on,” he murmured.

“Mr. Alban prefers instrumental music,” said Mrs. Sunning, apologetically, at the other end of the room. “If dear Charlotte would only practise more ! But she is one of those tiresome people who cannot be induced to take pains. She never will improve herself. Mr. Alban, you know, has *such* a choir,” and presently she rustled forward.

“Here’s mother come to speak about her sitting,” said Charlotte. “I tell her it isn’t your business, but she will have it you can help her.”

“For Sunday evenings. I go to my own church in the mornings, Mr. Alban ; but I do not like to be dependent on my sister-in-law—who is always most good and kind in offering to take me—for your delightful Sunday evening service. I know I am depriving some one else when I go with her ; and as it is only one sitting I require, for Charlotte, poor child, is generally tired—at least she dislikes going out on Sunday evenings——”

“Keep that for aunt Hen, my dear mamma. Mr. Alban knows perfectly what I do on Sunday evenings. There is no illusion between us,” with a glance towards him. “It’s a case of churchwarden, isn’t it ?” continued

Charlotte, inserting herself between the two. “I told her so, Sebastian—(I shall only call you ‘Sebastian’ in private, you need not be afraid”)—aside, her mother’s attention being diverted by departing guests; “it would never do for a poor, despised worldling to make free with the Christian name of a great pillar of the Church. The worldling appreciates the position. Even Olivia shakes in her shoes when her brother says, ‘Olivia, what is this I hear of you?’ But we are proud of our brother and our friend all the same,” and two large eyes shone softly upon him, eyes in which, moreover, there was a lurking appeal, a disarming piteousness.

“Flattery,” murmured he, looking straight back.

“Flattery, of course.” With lightning quickness came the response. “A woman’s weapon, and a cruelly inadequate one when it rattles against a breast of steel. I might have known *you* would be proof; but what can I do to make you think a little more kindly of me? I believe you would, too, if you allowed yourself,” and now there was a pretty air of defiance.

“Say rather if you allowed me,” replied he, gravely.

“You never give me a chance. You only see me from the outside, and from your eagle heights—there, you shake your head, you are upon them at this moment—but just now you fluttered down a little way, and called me ‘Charlotte’. And you liked my playing; oh, I saw that; you looked at me kindly, for the music touched your heart. I knew it would. I used to play to you when you came to the old schoolroom——”

“When you were a bright, innocent little girl. Return to your former self—no, to a better self; for even then you were not wholly artless; now——” he paused, he thought, was it fancy that with the word ‘now’ she shuddered? A stony look crept over her face.

“Well? Now?” she said, bitterly.

"Is there any need for me to say more? I think not. God has given you a conscience——"

"He has given me nothing else. Not a hand to help, nor a friend to speak. Why am I to be left alone to fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil? You might——"

"No," said Alban, sadly. He paused and added, "Neither I nor others can help such as you. There are souls who can be won——"

"But I am not one of them."

"You are not. You must work out your own salvation without human aid, because—but I need not tell you why. Charlotte, you *know* it is so. Be sincere, and own it."

She made a petulant movement.

"If I were not so convinced of this," continued he, steadily, "I should not dare to refuse the responsibility you press upon me; even now vanity whispers, 'Accept it; try your influence'—but——"

"Do! Do try."

He took the hand she held out, but his eyes were on the ground. To her infinite surprise there was a stifled whisper of which a few words barely reached her ear. It was not till she was alone and could think them over that she could believe they had been spoken.

All the rest of the evening vanished from remembrance. There had followed a meaningless hubbub, her mother had said something of playful reproach for detaining every one's farewells and usurping Mr. Alban's company for so long. Alban himself had gone off with the rest, making no attempt to outstay the last as she half expected him to do, and she had professed herself tired and sleepy and escaped the usual retrospective prattle after a party—but sleep was the last thing to be thought of when solitude and silence were ensured.

Throwing herself into a chair: “So that was it!” cried she, and clasped her hands behind her head, still half-stunned and breathless.

“He fears me. I am stronger than he. Than Sebastian Alban, good Lord!” A proud smile played over her features. “Alban who never pays a compliment and never owns allegiance! A very rock of celibacy and piety—and not a little set up in his own opinion—I thought I should never make any impression upon him! Alban! I can’t believe it!” Suddenly she sprang up and paced the room, then stood at the window, finally flung herself down again.

“He was in earnest; there was no sham about it. The saintly Sebastian can sham as well as I when occasion demands, but to-night—I think I was inspired. I knew just how to touch him. Could feel him wince. And go he should not till he had blessed me, like Jacob’s angel. There, I knew I was inspired. If I had only thought of that at the time, it would have been fine—but, at any rate, I *did* it. I was Jacob, and had my angel on toast. He said some nasty things; the ‘bright, innocent little girl’ was rather strong by way of contrast, but one can’t blame the poor man for his priestly command of language. His ‘*now*’ was an anti-climax. It would have brought down the house—I mean the church—from the pulpit. Charlotte, you may plume yourself on having had the first preacher in London delivering himself of a masterpiece for your sole benefit.”

She paused and continued: “So now I know the best and the worst. I am past praying for—past other people’s praying for—but I am a host in myself. I rather like that. Talk of flattery, not all the flattery that has ever come my way is in it with those last words of Sebastian Alban. They were so spontaneous and involuntary; I don’t believe he half knew he was speak-

ing. Oh, I'll go and hear you on Sunday evenings, my dear friend; I don't think you will bore me now, not if you know I am there and get into the way of knowing. Mother's sitting is sure to be well in view, and I shall save her the trouble of occupying it sometimes; it is she who prefers the house and the sofa after my Sunday teas. So, Mr. Alban, we shall meet again. . . . And, by the way," continued Charlotte, with a sudden thought, "what about my poor, dear, neglected Drax all this time? Really, I am glad for the poor fellow; he was so pathetically worthy. Aladdin's palace will make up to him for the little disappointment of last summer, and if he really is, as Alban had the bad taste to tell me to my face, in flourishing spirits, he may remain so for me. I shan't molest the patriarchal household. A 'pleasant picture' indeed"—Alban's words recurring to her mind—"very pleasant—as the picture of a rich man usually is. Drax should sit to Ouless in that capacity. 'Portrait of a Rich Gentleman.' It would be the picture of the year. . . . He will be immensely run after," continued she, musingly. "Every girl he comes across will set her cap at him. Adonis Rotherham—we want a new Adonis in the Park; and if that old windbag (thinking of poor Blake) was right about the phaeton and high-steppers—and I think, somehow I *think* he was, and that Alban had a purpose in pooh-poohing him—it will take no time for 'The Colonial' to be the fashion. What will Tarpy say?"—Lord Tarporley's nickname having revived visions of himself—"Something nasty, no doubt. I shan't care, though mother will feel bad, I daresay." A pause. "If it had not been for her, I might by now have been Mrs. Drax Rotherham, and bored to death with a poor, dear, hopeless hubby," continued Charlotte, lightly. "What Drax is now, when he was so painfully good then, Heaven only knows. Evidently he is com-

pletely under Alban's thumb, and if it makes him the happier"—her expression softened—"I don't grudge, that is, I don't mind Alban's thinking better of him than he does of me. After to-night I don't fancy he will speak hardly of me either," she reflected, pensively.

CHAPTER XI.

IN LADY HENRIETTA'S BAROUCHE.

"YES, my dear, the best thing you can do is to whistle him back as fast as you can," said Olivia.

Olivia, Alban's sister, and Charlotte's great friend, whom in confidential moments she called a 'horrid woman,' was a little, dark, bat-like creature, with a tongue as sharp as a needle, and a pair of brilliant, penetrating eyes which nothing escaped.

Charlotte, who feared no one else on earth, dreaded and conciliated Olivia Jephson.

"He may yet be re-captured," proceeded the little lady, who had contrived to know, as she knew everything, about Rotherham, both in the past and present; "but you ought to lose no time, Charlotte. It was unlucky that you could not know what was going to happen, and you have my profoundest sympathy—but the case is not hopeless even yet."

"Alas! I fear it is," said Charlotte. She was prepared for this, having come round to see her friend on purpose.

"Sebastian is quite silly about him," proceeded Olivia. "Sebastian takes up people, you know. I wish he would take up me. He never does."

"What brother ever takes up a sister?" replied Charlotte, airily. "If I had one, he would have wondered what on earth the men found in me to like? But *your* brother, Olivia, he and I are rather friends."

"You had better enlist his good offices with Drax Rotherham then. By the way, it was just after your little affair with 'The Colonial' that he and Sebastian formed their coalition. Oh, I heard; I got it out of those boys of mine."

Now Charlotte had never thought of this; indeed she had taken it for granted that Drax himself had told Alban his story, directly it became apparent that Alban knew it; but if it had only come through Olivia's boys, all that he had said on the subject the night before might go for nothing.

"The wretches!" cried she, laughing, and, for no reason whatever, experienced a feeling of relief.

"They did not want to tell me," proceeded Olivia, with vivacity. "I fancy uncle Sebastian had ordered them not; but I'm not I if I can't circumvent my dear brother when he comes between me and my sons. I just spoke as if I knew all about it, and they could tell me nothing; and the dear fellows opened their mouths and—spoke. You had a high old time down in that rivery, willowy, earwigy part of the world; no one but you would have thought of such a charming plan; and if only you had not been so precipitate, you might have snapped your fingers at us all now."

"Supposing I wished to," said Charlotte, drily.

"No need to take up that attitude, my dear. I know you are simply grinding your teeth with vexation, and I feel most awfully sorry for you. He is divinely beautiful, and will be the rage directly. Already people are asking who he is, and thanking God that the pretty girls he drives out are only his sisters. He'll marry them off, of course. George Tregillis is supposed to be after one; and, anyhow, you could have cleared the house if you had secured him when you had the chance."

"I *was* a fool," said Charlotte, composedly. "The worst of it is, that I shall never get him back now."

"Sebastian says he is one of the most lovable of human beings. I hate men when they say that of each other; it sounds so mawkish; but, of course, Sebastian can say anything; it is his business to be mawkish, and he makes up for it at others by being as hard as the nether millstone. He's simply adamant when I want him to think *me* 'loveable'."

"And it takes me all my time to make him think *me* so," assented Charlotte, who had been on the defensive, as the reader may perceive, from the beginning of the interview.

She often was so with Olivia, whose wit matched her own, whose knowledge occasionally exceeded her own, and who had neither affection, nor respect, nor pity for any human being.

Olivia, on her part, had a secret jealousy of her friend's beauty and power. Charlotte had a dominion to which she never attained. In her own set, and possibly a little beyond it, she was, to a certain extent, flattered and sought after; but this popularity was by no means disinterested, as she was rich, restless, and forever courting notice by the most potent means she knew, namely that of the purse; and she had always a lurking fear that the moment she ceased putting her hand in her purse she would be dropped.

Success with her, therefore, was a continual effort; and, even when attained, it was on a small scale as compared with that of Charlotte Sunning.

Thus in her raillery there was the frequent prick of steel—no jest but had its barbed dart; whereas her opponent, often unaware why Olivia was so spiteful, for she honestly thought the little creature attractive, was

only concerned to turn aside the shaft and conceal the wound.

"I am afraid we are both miserable sinners in your brother's eyes," continued Charlotte, lightly, "but, naturally, a miserable sinner who is not one's sister is more interesting——"

"You said that before, my dear. But you may spare your pains if you think to make any impression on Sebastian. Eve herself would have bitten her apple before him in vain. If he had been like any one else he might have gone in for one of those Rotherham girls. They must have some of the money, and I suggested it to him. I said, couldn't he find them 'loveable' to more purpose than the brother?"

"Well? Couldn't he?"

"He was only disagreeable—as usual. And he doesn't want me to call. Has he allowed you to call?"

"It would be a case of opportunity. I could sneak in by the back door when he wasn't looking."

"Or you might faint in the front of the house, and have to be carried across the threshold. So you don't mean to let Drax Rotherham go?" There was a quick, sharp change of tone. She was now looking out from under her eyelids in the way that always put Charlotte on her guard.

Not a word of Charlotte's indifference had been credited; it had been regarded as a mere firing off of blank cartridges, a species of gay salute—but the battle was now to begin.

Yet when Charlotte left home that morning she had settled the Rotherham matter in her mind precisely as she presented it to Olivia; she would bewail her loss and the improbability of ever regaining that which she had thrown away, but in such a fashion that the truth would be manifest; she had had enough of Drax.

Further than that, Charlotte's heart, that troublesome inmate of her bosom, which had a knack of letting her know of its existence when least expected, had been touched by something in Alban's manner when speaking of his friend. Alban had tried to be jaunty and assured. A tremulous anxiety had been audible in every note of his voice.

He had not been rude to her; he had even been careful not to hurt her—but she saw that he was terribly in earnest, and she knew that he was absolutely right. She was no fitting wife for Drax Rotherham; he was no fitting husband for her.

Alban himself—she found herself thinking a great deal more about Alban himself, than of the subject of his solicitude, when the evening was over. He had besought her—not in so many words, but she understood the man—not to disturb the peace of Rotherham's soul. Well, she would not—but Alban must plead for this again and yet again.

He had protested his inability to make a convert of herself, but he could not refuse to protect the interests of one already made, and one obviously dear to him. She would summon the shepherd to speak about the sheep, and thus Drax should still be of some good to her, albeit she had to hold aloof from personal intercourse.

She would make the most of her sacrifice, handling it delicately, and with that she would be content; and she had arrived at this conclusion with a sense of self-approbation seldom experienced and seldomer merited when she set forth to hear what Olivia Jephson had to say on the subject.

Olivia had large ears on a small head. They never missed the most trivial *on dit*, and Charlotte would have been infinitely more surprised by her not knowing any-

thing about the Rotherhams than by her knowing as much as she did. She anticipated, too, her friend's peculiar form of commiseration, hiding secret glee. Olivia would be charmed that she had missed a great marriage which might have passed for, might almost have been a love marriage as well. Olivia was a malicious creature; Charlotte was prepared to mind nothing she said.

What she was not prepared for was the effect upon herself of her friend's presence. The very air the little woman breathed had a peculiar influence, suggestive, stimulative—the reverse of good. The two excited each other. Olivia was never so keen and sly and brimful of diverting wickedness as when alone with Charlotte; while Charlotte, herself accustomed to sway and play upon the sensibilities of others, was well aware that she might pipe her wildest music in vain if Olivia chose not to dance.

"So you don't mean to let Drax Rotherham go?" said the latter.

"Oh, dear, no!" quoth Charlotte, promptly.

"I thought not. Too good a billet. Lance and Poppy pointed him out to me one day in the Park, and I drove round by his house and inspected it afterwards. But, my dear girl, you will have to hurry up. You ought to have been here a month ago. What were you doing not to get back from Nice sooner?"

"We did not come straight from Nice. We took several other places by the way. Drax could wait."

"You knew about him, then?"

"Knew?" Charlotte laughed derisively. "We were not *quite* out of post-office range; we had *some* correspondents, even though you don't favour us, you bad thing! How about a certain person himself, eh?" with a significant, triumphant smile.

For once Olivia was caught. She was so completely surprised and out-flanked that she did what she was very, very rarely known to do, she betrayed upon her countenance what passed within.

"You did not think of that," pursued Charlotte—this moment made up to her for many bad ones—"you, with all your cleverness. If you had been a man you could not have been more dense, excuse my saying it—I always do you justice, Olivia. I would not have insulted you by *telling*. You ought to have had an intuition, my dear."

"So I should, knowing my Charlotte. But I have been taken up by my own—never mind what. A paltry excuse. My little affairs are never worth any one's attention."

"Let it be a lesson to you," said Charlotte, severely. "When you think you know everything—and you do know a great deal—just say to yourself, 'I was a very little out on one occasion,' and you will be so humble and sweet that we shall all adore you even more than we do already. Now I must fly. What an age I have stayed here already, and I have a thousand things to do, and that tiresome Mirabel to scold—what do you think? she has sent me a 'waist'—that's a word I picked up from those dear Americans—we met such charming Americans at Nice, I must tell you about them some other day—and oh! such a dressmaker! she was simply divine, and disgusts me with every other—you still go to Mirabel?—well, so do I, for she is the best one can get here—but as for that 'waist,' it is abominable! I believe the sleeves are outside in, the beast! She knows she *can* make one look nice if she likes—and so I shall tell her. I shall talk of the Nice woman; that will make her jib! Must really be off now; bye-bye"—kissing effusively—"when are you coming to see us?"

"Some day when you don't want me," cried Olivia, running after, for there was a flash and rustle with the last words, and Charlotte was half-way down the stairs ere she had sufficiently recovered herself to speak. "Charlotte!"

"Well?" from the front door.

"I shall find out all about it, you know."

"Of course." Charlotte came back and looked up, laughing. "The future is not the past, though, my dear. What about the past?" laughing again, and the door opened and closed.

Never before had Olivia had the tables so turned upon her.

Charlotte's mission being to see and scold Mme. Mirabel, a Bond Street dressmaker, it was curious that she did not turn her steps in that direction after she had quitted the Jephsons' house in St. James's Place.

Instead of turning towards Piccadilly, she walked swiftly along Pall Mall, and, crossing over to the south side, turned again to the right on reaching Waterloo Place, without a moment's deviation from her course. Obviously she had an object in view.

Londoners will, of course, divine what this was, but for the benefit of the uninitiated we may remark that in this favoured quarter, with clubland and theatreland on the one hand, and the green trees of St. James's Park, bordered by the great Offices of State, the Horse Guards, the Admiralty, and the Houses of Parliament on the other, there stands a noble row of edifices, whose windows may be seen shining in the earliest rays of the morning sun by less fortunate dwellers on the opposite side of the Park, and that those glinting casements pertain to Carlton House Terrace.

What precise gratification Charlotte proposed to derive from an outside inspection of the Rotherhams'

house in Carlton House Terrace she could not have told herself; she had no intention of doing more than look at it, and she knew already what she was likely to see in it; but while, during the past six months, she had well-nigh forgotten the existence of her quondam admirer, he now filled her thoughts, and set her curiosity on edge. She might see something, she might meet some one, if she put herself in the way of doing so.

At any rate she was not in the mood for doing anything else.

If she went to Mirabel's, or to other shopping resorts, she was sure to fall in with people she knew, and would have to talk and be *au fait* with all the fashionable tittle-tattle of the moment; whereas, one subject only, and that the one she preferred to keep out of sight, engrossed her thoughts.

She had almost promised Alban to let Drax Rotherham alone. She knew that he had taken it so, and she did not of herself care much about Drax; the fancy for him had passed—but for Olivia Jephson she could and would have gone her way, and let him go his—but what could she say when Olivia was so horribly exasperating? Olivia always did contrive to provoke the worst there was in her. She shuddered to think how that little forked tongue would have licked its lips had she yielded to her heart on a certain summer evening when Drax, as a poor, obscure individual, so nearly, so very nearly, pleaded his cause and won it. Olivia would have run about all over the place to tell the story—with variations.

Now, the little wretch was shaking in her shoes; and now, if only the defunct emotions which had been so inconvenient once, could be galvanised into life again, and Charlotte fall anew under the spell of those soft, dark, adoring eyes, how great would be her glory! "He really loved me," she whispered to herself.

And she had almost, if not quite, loved him! For his sake she had almost, if not quite, contemplated a renunciation incredible in the retrospect!

Yet why incredible? There was—who could deny it?—a magnetism about the man which drew towards him others as well as herself. He was not clever, he was almost dull, at any rate slow and grave, quite the reverse of amusing; yet had he demanded, "Who is on my side, who?" not women only, but keen-witted, world-experienced men—Alban and Tarporley, for example—would have unhesitatingly responded to the appeal.

And now she reflected that Alban had taken an unfair advantage on the previous evening. He had extracted a promise which was no promise. Under compulsion she had been weak enough to—no, she was not bound to abide by anything he chose to take for granted; she had not had time to consider; she had been over hasty; Sebastian Alban was a bully and a tyrant—knowing her impulsive nature, he traded on it—altogether, she felt ill-used and rebellious. Why should Alban be so hard upon her?

He intended to select a wife for Drax Rotherham, of course; some one who would be well under the thumb of her spiritual adviser, but who would also have a devoted husband well under hers. And that girl, some namby-pamby miss, would be driving behind the high-steppers so unctuously paraded by Colonel Blake, would be swaggering in and out of that fine house—she eyed it with knitted brows, slowly strolling past on the other side of the way—and every one would call her lucky, and talk about her, and envy her.

"But I could put a spoke in that young lady's wheel if I chose," muttered Charlotte.

She was turning away, having satisfied her curiosity, when the front door of Rotherham's house opened.

She dropped her parasol a little on one side and watched from beneath. Who was coming? Drax himself? In that case she would have to decide on the instant; but her breath had scarcely begun to come and go, ere it died down, perceiving no cause for quickened pulsation in a little group which with some bustle and importance emerged into the sunlight, having for its centre a bath-chair.

In the bath-chair, muffled to the chin, sat an elderly invalid.

Charlotte, after a second glance, walked rapidly away.

"My dear mamma, how thankful I am that you have always had good health," cried she, an hour later. "I don't see myself, I must own, with a sick 'parient'. Whose sick 'parient' do you think I saw to-day? Drax Rotherham's." She had not mentioned Drax Rotherham's name before.

Nor had Mrs. Sunning, who knew, none better, when to let sleeping dogs lie, though what her thoughts had been we will not insult the understanding of our readers by suggesting. She had wondered how long it would be before Charlotte spoke.

"Yes, I went round that way," proceeded Charlotte, calmly, "on purpose. Not on purpose to see the old man——"

"But the young one."

"Not the young one—yet. I went to prospect merely. You heard what they said last night?"

Mrs. Sunning had heard.

"More in sorrow than in anger, I daresay."

"Anger, my dear? Why anger?"

"Sometimes people are angry with themselves. I have known such things happen."

"If you mean that I ought to blame myself, Charlotte——"

"Not at all; oh dear, no. You were or Je too previous, and any one might be that."

"I could not possibly foresee what was to happen," murmured Mrs. Sunning, plaintively, "and it seemed to me that I could not in common prudence sanction anything at *that* time between you and Mr. Rotherham; but you know I always liked him, Charlotte," eagerly. "I never had a thing against him personally. So kind, so pleasant and attentive as he always was, even to me, when he must have felt me in the way, a bore and a marplot," laughing. "I know I felt quite cruel, and hardly knew how to carry out what I felt to be my duty, when the dear fellow was so devoted, so absolutely enslaved. Never was any one more in love. I can see his face——" she paused.

"It is some time since you saw it, too."

"Well, my dear, of course. You had to give him his *congé*; and he took it as a gentleman should. He withdrew. What else could he have done?"

"Olivia Jephson says he will be the rage directly. Every one is asking about him."

"Olivia talks nonsense. I don't believe he is so very rich; not abnormally so. I have, ahem! inquired."

"And you only heard enough to make you remember that you 'always liked him,' whereas I——" she smiled sarcastically, "I am not quite sure whether what I have heard—and seen—warrants my remembering that or not."

"Oh, my love! he is quite, quite worth—that is to say, there is nothing to prevent your following the dictates of your heart."

"But it won't dictate, that is the worst of it. I don't care about Drax now."

"Charlotte!"

"I don't. If you had let me have him when I wanted

“I have been in the seventh heaven to-day ; that you now allow him to be—but you did not—once, and you put before me so very plainly what would be like to be his wife that I——”

“But Charlotte ; but, dear love, the whole position is changed. It was not Mr. Rotherham, it was his circumstances and surroundings which would have been so unsuited to you. I never said a word against Mr. Rotherham, never!”

“Never, till you were afraid of him. He might have been as ‘devoted’ and ‘enslaved’ as he chose provided I had remained staunch ; however, let’s have done with this. I don’t blame you, I daresay you were right. We should not have done well together——”

“You would! you would! Indeed you would! I have never seen you so taken with any one. And if you were married to a man you really cared for——”

“I tell you, mother, that I do not care for Drax Rotherham now.”

“You would if you saw him again.”

Charlotte was silent.

“Then why not meet? Meet accidentally. It would be easily done. He will be always about. Give yourself a chance of seeing how you feel. You cannot know, you cannot possibly know, as it is. The thing had entirely gone by, and you had, very properly, put it out of your mind ; but I prophesy that if this handsome, pleasant, dear fellow could charm you when he hadn’t a penny, he could do so still more now that he has the right to be bolder and more confident. A man does gain in dignity when conscious of——”

“A big house and a pair of high-steppers.” But Charlotte was listening.

“All the advantage and importance of wealth. Mr. Rotherham is modest, but when he was poor, one only

felt the background was his proper place; now, if he takes it, people will gather round ~~him~~ there. He is a good man; you remember making ~~gains~~ of his scruples once and I reproved you for it, though ~~they~~ *they were* a little—a little middle-class; but a young ~~man~~ *man* with half-a-million ought to support the Church and State. In fact, whatever a young man of Mr. Rotherham's status and fortune does would be considered right. Charlotte, I cannot tell you how pleased I have been thinking of all this."

"Poor mum! Quite providential, is it?"

"That you should have been on the verge of engaging yourself to him out of pure infatuation, as I called it then, and that now you should have the opportunity of gratifying your heart——"

"What about George Tregillis?" quietly.

"Yes, indeed, George Tregillis. One sees how a man of *that* sort acts under similar circumstances. Mr. Rotherham is pronounced quite invulnerable, while Sir George is said to be in full pursuit of one of these very Miss Rotherhams, the sisters."

"I heard the same. We must have been drawing the same coverts this morning. Olivia Jephson?"

"Yes—es. Yes, I did call on Olivia. She said you had been there."

"And bolstered you up with transcendental accounts of the Rotherham fortune. It was not put down at half-a-million last night. And you said just now he was not so very rich! Oh, mum!"

"My dear, I—I did not wish to put you off. But I own it, it *is* half-a-million. And he is quite the hero of the hour. Olivia——"

"Well?" said Charlotte.

As she spoke Olivia's little, evil face, with its slanting, watchful eyes, rose before her. In features Olivia was

strangely like her brother, but what words could describe the contrast in expression? And each had looked at Charlotte, and each searching gaze had penetrated deep, and she had responded to both.

How extraordinary it was that for once, and all unwittingly, the two were united in one common purpose—that of severing her from Drax Rotherham!

"I think I won't hear any more about Olivia just now," she said, turning away.

Strong-willed, self-reliant and masterful as she was, the opinion of the world—her world—was the one force which brought into play the weakness of Charlotte's nature. So long as she could meet it, and feel, or fancy herself supported by it she could trample unhesitatingly upon conventions, feelings, even upon convictions which were not wholly dead within her bosom; but before its hidden breath of ridicule or contempt she quailed. There was no struggling with *that*. No getting round *that*. Bravado? What could bravado do? And was it not the first faint murmur of that dreaded hiss which now sang in her ears?

A good many people knew about Rotherham; and what reason had any of them for being silent concerning the part he had played in her life a few months before? Why should she expect reticence from Lord Tarporley for instance?

Tarpy who had been turned away from her door on a certain day had embraced the first opportunity which offered of learning the name of her companion on the balcony. She had cheerfully told it him; and he, with equal unconcern, had assured her of his sympathetic approval.

"Two's company, three's none, isn't it?" said she.

"The saying should be writ in gold," replied he.

And they had both agreed that a better motto for

the little house in Charles Street could not be devised. And Tarpv was perfectly good-humoured and agreeable over it; but Charlotte felt that when, later on, his mother's invitation produced an excuse, he was telling himself that the motto fitted other doors than one.

Then there was Sir George Tregillis. George never looked nicely at her now, and yet he had partially got over that fateful day when long-legged Gerry Brown uncoiled himself from the depths of the boat, to the astonished eyes of the Cornish squire.

What, then, could it be? She had reproached Gerry to see what Gerry would say; and that simple youth, who still hung about her heels, his thirst unslaked, his hunger unappeased, confessed that he knew more about a certain rival than he had ever told any one—except Tregillis. Tregillis dragged it out of him.

"But of course it wasn't *your* fault," cried the faithful Gerry.

Colonel Blake had looked meaningly at Charlotte when Rotherham's name came up in conversation; Olivia Jephson had 'got it all' from her boys; the Dimsdales, when in Town for October shopping, had 'heard rumours,' and, to put a stop to these rumours, Charlotte's mother confided to dear Henrietta in a long, confidential chat, a most inconvenient amount of the truth: it really seemed as if Fate had gone out of its way to open every gossiping crevice.

There was one way, and but one, to triumph over all. With Drax Rotherham back, she would have her sails in full blast again.

Charlotte sat down in solitude to think about it. She had come upstairs to her own room after luncheon, having declined to drive with her mother, and denied herself to visitors; and she now drew up a chair to the

open window, and leaned back, her hands resting upon her lap.

"This has come upon me very suddenly," she said to herself.

The soft, spring air from without, full of the hum of renewed life, evoked responsive stirrings within her bosom. She loved the spring—loved the beginning of every London season, the prospect of its mirth, its revelry, its mastery.

Her quick imagination was fed and gratified by much that escaped the common eye. "Charlotte always sees so much," her mother would say; and the remark was not unjust.

But what she saw, and what pleased, amused, and captivated her, could only be viewed with complacency from one standpoint: the sunshine would lose its lustre, the flowers their brilliancy, the whole gay, glorious scene its enchantment, were it beheld from beneath, not from above.

To plod unrecognised along the pavements, to be poorly dressed, undistinguishable, a nobody—what was all the glamour of the London May-time to such an one?

A sense of this was vividly present to Charlotte's mind on the present occasion.

When contemplating the possibility of marrying Rotherham as a poor man she had shrunk from the thought of all that it involved, yet there was a struggle with softer and warmer emotions; now, when there was no need to struggle, the emotions had evanesced. She could not recall even what they felt like.

Such being the case, could she do without? Be content with a husband whom she had learned to disparage? 'Poor Drax' she had come to call him. She wondered at herself in regard to him. Absolutely he had nothing but his looks and his faith in herself—which last was

stupidity. If he could have appreciated her he would not have believed in her. Already she could feel the drag of his presence.

And it was for this poor, silly fool that Sebastian Alban had pleaded. It was for his sake—not for hers—that Alban's eye said, 'Let him go'. Earlier in the day she had thought of that look with feelings not unkind either to the one or the other; but now the recollection fretted her, as adding to her burden of indecision.

It was not for some time that a new idea arose. 'Would there be any difficulty in reclaiming her derelict? Would he be gladly reclaimed? Or?——'

"I think," exclaimed Miss Sunning, springing to her feet, "that I have sat here long enough." At the same moment there came a tap at the door.

"Lady Henrietta is below, miss," announced Kitchin, "to say will you drive with her?"

"Oh, no. Oh, yes," said Charlotte, in a breath.

"What shall I say, miss?"

"Nothing. I'll go down. Just look me over, will you? I wonder if I had better change my hat?" murmured Charlotte, thoughtfully. "The big carriage, is it, Kitchin?"

Kitchin peered over the window-sill.

"Yes, miss."

"Any one in it?"

"No one but her ladyship, miss."

"Give me my new hat," said Charlotte.

She had an adorable new hat, the same in which she had appeared to the Dimsdales the week before—(when it was on for the first time)—and although the simpler one, worn to walk about in during the morning, had called forth Olivia Jephson's loud approval: "You are great in hats, Charlotte"—and might have done well enough for her mother's victoria and a round of calls,

Lady Henrietta's grander equipage with only her aunt and herself in it, warranted a change.

She would make Henny-Penny go to the Park.

And in the Park there was no more noticeable figure that day than the girl in the mauve hat with its tossing ostrich plumes and parasol to match. Charlotte did not approve of contrasts, even though the fashion. She chose to defy fashion if a colour suited her, and to abide by it all through. She sat up by her aunt's side, her long neck drawn up, her head thrown back, the warm blood bright in her cheeks, the sap of life running strong in her veins. Lady Henrietta, not insensible to the glances on every side, sat up straighter than usual herself, in the enjoyment of driving her beautiful niece and participating in her triumph.

"What numbers of people you know, my dear."

Charlotte had scarcely ceased to salute and be saluted from the moment she entered the crowded part of the Park, which was now at its fullest.

"I can't think how you can be so quick at recognising faces," proceeded her ladyship, who rarely was in time with her bow, and needed Kitty to tell her who was who when a hat was lifted, or a pair of fingers fluttered. Kitty was painstaking and efficient, but her task was comparatively easy; whereas Charlotte was kept on the alert without a moment's intermission. It was wonderful.

"You must not talk to me though, aunt Hen."

"No, my dear," said aunt Hen, meekly.

"Because, you see, it needs all my wits," continued Charlotte, who had now made up her mind that Rotherham must be there, and that the meeting might take place at any moment. "When people *will* both drive and walk," murmured she (for she could not tell which

he would do), "it is desperately difficult," her voice dying away.

Was not that—no, it wasn't—but there was another—a phaeton, just as described by Colonel Blake, and a man in it with a girl. Heavens! how idiotic!—her heart was beating, and it was not Drax after all.

Again and again she thought she saw him; now among the walkers, now in a group standing still to converse; once leaning forward on a four-in-hand. Nevertheless, directly each false alarm was past, expectation recurred to the same point—it was holding his own reins on the box-seat of his own equipage that she should finally behold Drax Rotherham in *proprid persona*—and, oddly enough, it fell out that so she did.

Excitement blazed in her eyes; the unconscious woman by her side little guessed what made Charlotte laugh and talk so bewilderingly all at once; poor Henny-Penny little knew what she was doing when she brought her niece out to drive that day.

There was a slight block in the carriage line. Drax laid his whip across his knees, and looked about him. The Dimsdales' handsome barouche, with its be-wigged coachmen and powdered footman, turned in the opposite direction, yet at a standstill like his own, was so close that his eyes were immediately drawn towards the brilliant apparition within, and he had not a moment wherein to feel emotion of any kind before he was responding to Charlotte's salutation.

Although the two had not met before, it may be remembered that Rotherham mentioned to his friend Alban the fact of his having seen Miss Sunning on the previous day. He had seen her without a tremor, with only a little touch of natural gravity. She would always have an interest for him; she had been the first to awaken within him feelings which were very real and potential

while they lasted, and though what he had subsequently heard had in some sort altered these, and though he himself had altered since the episode which was now a memory, it was still too recent not to have a certain effect.

But he fancied that on the next occasion he should do better. A first sight was always more or less a shock; and, after all, it had not been so much of a shock as to prevent his talking of it openly and calmly.

When proposing to take Adeline to the Park that afternoon he recollected that Charlotte would probably be there; although he had not met her there before (but then he had only gone once or twice, and gone late), on this beautiful day when all the world was out a meeting was almost a certainty.

"Well, dear? What did you say?" He inclined his ear, for Addy was speaking, and now the horses were moving on.

"Oh, Drax, I have seen that girl before. I often wondered who she was? I never thought it could be your Miss Sunning, but— isn't it?"

"So I don't need to tell you? But you mustn't say 'your' Miss Sunning. No more mine than—yes, that was she."

"Oh, she *is* lovely. And did you see how people looked at her? Will she come back, I wonder? Do let us turn and meet her again. I never saw any one—I want to have another look. If I had only known who it was in a shop the other day——"

"There are the Haywards bowing to you."

"They do look dowdy." Adeline was never dowdy herself now. "Louie in a coat and skirt! How *can* she? She ought to know better. Even *we* know—and this is our first season. I told Evie she was never to come to the Park either morning or afternoon unless she

were properly dressed for it. Wasn't that a wonderful hat of Miss Sunning's?"

"I daresay."

"It would have been rather large for either of us," mused she, "but for her it was perfect. It seemed all feathers. I wonder what her frock was? It was something very smart, but I had only just time to see that. Drax, shan't we get to know her now?"

"Do you want to know her?"

"Why, of course! Why—do you mean we shan't, or that we had better not, or—what do you mean?"

"I mean that if you talk so fast, and take my attention off the horses——"

"But you do not generally mind the horses."

"There is not generally such a crowd. This is the fullest day I have ever been out on."

"There is Sir George Tregillis," said Adeline, her voice slightly changing. "He is looking as if he expected us to——"

"Draw up and speak. All right." He selected a spot by the footpath, and Sir George, who was among the walkers, eagerly approached. When Charlotte re-passed that way only Drax saw her.

He saw her, and again acknowledged her smiling bow and the wave of the hand by which it was accompanied—less ceremonious, more friendly and familiar he felt this second greeting to be.

Obviously Charlotte had no *arrière-pensée*, and was unconscious of any on his part; of any that might interfere with a smooth surface acquaintanceship desirable under the circumstances.

Had she looked the other way, or looked awkward and uncomfortable, or looked anything but what she did, perfectly at ease, and even desirous of catching his eye, he would have understood to keep away from

Charles Street; as it was, he supposed he had better call—it would hardly do not to call. He would wait a little and then call.

“Whatever Alban may say,” thought he, dubiously.

And then he had to listen to a proposition from Tre-gillis, who had shown a perfect genius for propositions of late; and in hearing all he had to say, and all Addy had to say, and in playing the necessary, if minor, part of brother on such an occasion, the next quarter of an hour passed.

“Well, good-day,” said Rotherham, turning his horses to go. As he did so, Charlotte was seen approaching for the third time. The crowd of vehicles had thinned, and enabled the barouche to turn at the Albert Gate.

“Come and see us,” cried she, gaily, as she swept past within a few feet.

He set his teeth. Dash it all! who should prevent his going?

CHAPTER XII.

THE PROGRESS OF EVENTS.

IT was past six o'clock one afternoon, a few weeks after this, that Mrs. Jephson, sitting alone in her drawing-room for a moment's breathing space between the rush of the day and that of the evening to follow, turned her head at the opening of the door, and beheld a visitor who seldom crossed her threshold.

"My brother!" exclaimed she, throwing up her hands with a little theatrical gesture; "there is but one person I should have less expected to see, and that is—my husband. All hail, Sebastian!"

"I am lucky to find you at home, Olivia."

"Oh, uncommonly. You are so often turned away, are you not? However, no offence. Sit down, old fellow," dropping into a chair herself. "To what am I indebted, etc., etc.?"

"Are you all well?" said he, doing as he was bid. "How are the boys?"

"The boys!" echoed Olivia, sardonically. "How are the boys? Do you mean to tell me that you came here to inquire after the boys? Come, come, sir! That won't pass. In this house people come to see *me*, and I am much mistaken," eyeing him keenly, "if even the great Mr. Alban himself had any other object. Well, what is it?" a shade of curiosity manifesting itself.

"I must own you are right, Olivia." He smiled at her quickness, then hesitated and looked round: "Shall

we be alone for a few minutes? There is something I want to talk to you about."

"Of course. To lecture me. I have been suffered too long to run about unlectured. However, if it amuses you," and she rang the bell, "you shall have a free hand for the next half-hour, and that is doing it handsomely. Admit no one else," to the footman who appeared in answer to the summons. "And now, my dear and only brother, although I am very happy, and highly honoured by your bestowing your valuable presence upon me, may I just hint that time is precious to us both——"

"I know; I know;" but still it seemed he could not overcome the reluctance to begin.

"What have I been about, Sebastian? Upon my word, I can't think of anything extra wicked. Not of any particular vanity. But if you would kindly name it——"

"Olivia——" he paused again. It was always difficult to him to be himself in the presence of this his own and only sister; there was something to him, as to Charlotte, sinister and antagonistic in the very air she breathed; it exhaled a perfume peculiar to herself; all her surroundings reflected herself; and he had known and knew Olivia as perhaps no one else knew her. Sincerity and reality withered before that cold, mocking eye; she never had believed, never would believe in their existence, save when that existence pointed to self-gratification in its basest form.

Again and again in former years he had sought vainly to awaken in her breast some better and purer emotions; as a younger man, when hope was more buoyant and affection stronger, he had clung to the belief that patient persistency would yet have its reward; but of late he had come to perceive that any change in a nature

so resolute and dominating must be derived from other sources, and that intervention with her concerns only led to a wider estrangement between the two. He, who could direct, counsel, command others, had absolutely no influence here.

Such being the case, it may be asked: Why, then, waste time and breath on a bootless errand? Alban's reply would have been: "Two people may work to the same end from different motives". From something let fall by Charlotte, he gathered that his sister, equally with himself, was opposed to a union which he regarded as a calamity; but that nevertheless, under a delusion, she was urging it on. He proposed, by opening her eyes, to enlist her on his side.

But he hated doing it. He hated talking at all upon the subject. Nothing but dire necessity had driven him to the Jephsons' house, and even now, with all things favourable and Olivia waiting, the opening words stuck in his throat.

"This must be something bad, indeed," said she, drily.

He started. "Bad?" He had not followed her train of thought.

"You can't even bring yourself to name it to your depraved sister. And she, for the life of her, can't divine it without assistance. Her perceptions are so blunt, poor thing. Good gracious, Sebastian! do hurry up," laughing more good-humouredly; "we shall never get on at this rate. What awful thing have I done?"

"But you have done nothing," said he, still somewhat bewildered. "I beg your pardon for this stupidity. I——" he put his hand to his forehead, "I have not been following you. You seem to think——"

"I think that your brains are getting addled, my poor, dear, wonderful brother. 'Much learning hath made thee mad'—there's one of your own texts for you.

So you have not come to preach? Well, well; wonders never cease. Take your time then; oh, I feel quite pleasant and sisterly now," and she really looked pleasant.

"I have come to ask your help," said Alban, quietly.

Olivia almost bounded from her seat. Her help? Did her ears deceive her? She had never in her life heard such a phrase from his lips, and for a moment incredulity prevailed. Was this a cunning move of diplomacy? Was it a figure of speech masking a covert attack? Alban, the scholar, was a past master of language, and—but there he sat before her, pale, grave, sincere—she reserved her opinion.

"Go on," she murmured, suspiciously.

"I believe, Olivia, that you and I are at one on a certain matter, and that although we may see it from different, possibly opposite points of view——"

"That's certain; but so long as we see it at all," hinted she, "take courage. Now, what is this matter? I like plain speaking, and we have had the preamble. Is it about myself, or yourself?"

"Neither. It is about—Charlotte."

"Charlotte? The great Charlotte? Come, this is interesting; this promises sport. Oh, don't glare at me like that; remember we are agreed to look at it from 'different, possibly opposite points of view,' and what's death to you may be sport to me, eh? What about Charlotte? What little game—stop! I know. It's this Rotherham business, of course."

"It is."

"And?——"

"And I believe—I am sure that you desire it to cease, as I do."

"You mean that we neither of us wish her to win him back. Oh, I know the whole story—know it quite

as well as you do; and *now* I understand your interest in it; you think your dear Rotherham too good for her?"

"I think it would be a most unhappy, wretched marriage."

"So do I. I hate to think of it. She would flap her wings——"

"You are doing all you can to bring it about, Olivia."

"Indeed, I am doing nothing of the kind," said Olivia, resentfully. "What on earth made you think such a thing? My dear idiot, what should I do it *for*? What possible good could it do *me*? Am I one of Charlotte's creatures to pander to her? She knows better;" with jealous significance.

"Let me speak." He lifted his hand with an imperious gesture.

"Now don't browbeat me, Sebastian."

"You won't say so, if you will only listen. Did I not say that we were in sympathy, that is united——"

"For once in our lives."

"In the light we look upon this unfortunate business?"

"Yet you accuse me of furthering it!"

"Unintentionally, I do. Emphatically I do. Rotherham is now at the Sunnings' house daily. He has no intentions at present—at least I believe he has none, but he has grown reticent to me on the subject. I fancy he would say that he and Charlotte are alike content to be friends, and that on neither side is there any inclination for more than friendship—but I feel, nay, I am sure, that this is his simplicity, and that before he knows he will be—will be——"

"Caught."

Alban winced. Yet 'caught' was what he meant.

"I see, and I agree with you," continued Olivia, after

a moment's reflection. "If he is a little more trouble than Charlotte at first anticipated, that will be all in his favour. But I knew from the first that he was a doomed man."

"And knowing it, you fostered it. Stop! I will tell you how. Charlotte has a heart. It is overlaid with folly and frivolity. It is seldom, if ever, allowed any voice in her reckless pursuit of pleasure, in her greedy gratification of the senses, in her boundless rage for conquest——"

"I must say it is nice to hear you, Sebastian. You do pile it up." She gave her shoulders a little shrug of satisfaction, and stretched her ears for more.

"I know no one on whom the world has a firmer hold," proceeded he, as if to himself. "It grips her like a vice. Her very passions are subservient to it. But while I have seen, and do see daily, God help me! among those I am called upon to minister to, natures as callous, as selfishly depraved; I do *not* see——" he paused; about his lips there played a little nervous movement. Olivia watched it from beneath her eyelids. For once she held her peace, wise in her generation.

"I say Charlotte has a heart," resumed Alban, rousing himself, for he had fallen into a momentary abstraction. "God forgive me if I do injustice to others, but often I think they have none. They come to my church, and I search my soul in vain to find anything left unsaid by which I could make one single abiding impression. They make a mummery of worship; like puppets they go precisely through each form and posture, but within all is emptiness and vacuity. Charlotte——" again he paused, and again she would not interrupt. "I thought I could have worked upon her—that there was something to work upon—so I tried. Yesterday I tried—and failed."

Olivia drew a breath, and leaned towards him, mute, attentive.

"It was about Rotherham. He has become a very dear friend of mine. I knew about his—about him and Charlotte; and, knowing her, could be at no loss to piece for myself such portions of the story as were missing; and when this unexpected change of fortune befel him, I feared that it would make an alteration in her feelings. About his, alas! there can be no doubt. He is loyal to her, quite unconscious that he has aught against her. He thinks she did not care for him, and that is all. He has no idea, and it would be useless to try to get the idea into him, that he was rejected, or at any rate dismissed, because he had not the wealth and position indispensable in the eyes of a woman of the world. Rotherham has never been a poor man; his prospects have always been excellent; and, even as he was last year, he could have afforded to marry, had his wife been willing to begin with a modest establishment, which need not even have been too modest. I had it all from himself, and I fancy he was careful that the Sunnings knew. He is a remarkably upright, straightforward man. I am telling you all this, Olivia," the speaker interrupted himself, "because it bears distinctly on the present issue. A moment's patience, and I shall have done."

"I see," said she, succinctly.

"Where was I? Oh, that I felt my only hope lay in touching the better feelings of Charlotte's nature, so yesterday I tried. She had sent for me, and herself began upon the subject. Something, but not of consequence, had passed between us a little while ago, and since she was a little girl I had never seen her in a mood so gentle and amenable. She spoke of old times and complained that I had forgotten them. She begged me

to think more kindly of her—yes, I see you smile, Olivia—and yet it was real, it was genuine while it lasted. Had I not felt sure of this, I should not have obeyed her summons yesterday, for I have long felt that my poor efforts are as ineffectual with her as——”

“With me. I could have told you that.”

“But——”

“But you had the heart to fall back upon, the wonderful heart that still drags out its lame-duck existence beneath ‘the folly and frivolity’. Well, did you succeed in making it wobble?”

“No.”

“No? Poor Sebastian!”

“It is because of this that I am here to-day. Charlotte was at her worst and flightiest. She flung at me jests and aphorisms that would not have disgraced Rabelais, but from her, a young girl——” he drew a breath and proceeded. “She boldly accused me of coming between her and Mr. Rotherham; said a great deal about people not knowing their own minds and seeing no reason why they should not change—all pointing the one way; finally, she tried to make *me* promise what I had set out with the intention of making *her*!”

“Greek met Greek. It must have been a very pretty fight.”

“I was to say I would leave Drax Rotherham alone. She maintained that he was competent to take his own line of conduct, and would do so, despite me; but she preferred not to have me antagonistic. In the heat of the moment it slipped out that she also reckons you, and indeed every other friend she possesses, among her antagonists in this matter.”

“And yet you say——”

“That it is the frantic folly of having a supposed triumph over you all which is Rotherham’s main attrac-

tion in Charlotte's eyes. Once she may have cared for him, I do not know; she certainly does *not* care now. There was a hardness in her voice when she spoke of him—I could almost call it contempt—as if he were some poor creature over whom we were wrangling for the mastery. I fancy that she herself even perceived this, for every now and then she made a pretence, I am convinced it was a pretence, of other feelings. But there was no mistaking the real elation with which—but perhaps I am wrong in repeating this. I have thought and thought about it until—Olivia, it is a very real, a very great trouble to me, and I have no one to turn to——”

“But me. And for once in your life you acted like a man of sense. Saintly souls are usually absolute idiots when it comes to anything practical—and you, my dear Sebastian, are no exception to the rule—but you have come out quite strong on this occasion, and I am proud to acknowledge it. Now, to business. Charlotte simply annihilated you—I could have told you she would—there's not a man living she can't twist round her finger—but,” a hard light gleamed in the narrow, slanting eyes, “dear Charlotte didn't think she had her friend Olivia to reckon with. She little dreamed it would come round to me——”

“Ah—h!” He started as if he had been stung.

“Oh, don't you fear,” said she, coolly. “I shan't betray my fellow-conspirator. That would about do for us both. Besides, I wouldn't take from your reputation, Seb, for worlds; it is one of my most valued commodities wherever I go. I say, ‘My brother is too good for this world,’ and shake my head and turn up my eyes, and even Charlotte is taken in; she really does think you are above the clouds; but if she knew that——”

“Good God! what have I done?” he cried.

"In the Church of Rome they'd call it betraying the confessional, Father Alban."

The colour left Alban's face.

"We of the baser sort would call it a shabby trick. Honour among thieves, you know."

"And I—I——" stammered he, in an agony.

"Would you like Charlotte to know you had come here to-day in order to tell me about her?" Olivia mercilessly pursued her advantage. "Mind, I don't say it wasn't the game; all's fair in love and war, and this is both love *and* war; it is only rather surprising that you who fly so high above us all——"

"Could stoop so low," said he, bitterly. "I see, I see it now. Would God I had seen it before! Olivia, I implore you, I adjure you——"

"Can't get out of it now, Sebastian."

He saw that she enjoyed his torments.

"Caught tripping for once, Sebastian. Now look here," continued Olivia, patting him on the shoulder, "you and I will be better friends in future for this, and let that console you. One touch of nature, you know. Heavens, man, you meant no harm," with a little amused impatience, "but you really did play it rather low down on Charlotte to come to me, her special and particular friend, with a plan of her campaign. I shall call you my Dreyfus—oh, I daresay Dreyfus is guilty, I shouldn't think any the worse of him if he were—it's the being found out that is the thing. You know the eleventh commandment—'Thou shalt not be found out'? No. Well, you shan't break it through me. Now," glancing at the clock, "I think you must go, my dear. And you may come again as soon as you have anything else to tell me. What's more, I'll engage to make very good use of the information. I promise you it shan't be wasted."

He murmured a miserable protest.

"Shall I repeat to you likewise? Shall we act in concert?"

"No, no!"

"No, no? Yes, yes;" laughing and nodding. "What? You wouldn't do the deed, the wicked deed, and get no good of it? Besides, the end justifies the means, you know; isn't that part of a parson's creed? It is, though. I know it is. Look here, Sebastian," more seriously, "you really are a good sort; I am not altogether blind to your merits, whatever you may think; and I know you mean well and all that—so don't worry yourself. Perhaps it wasn't quite O.K. what you did just now, but it was not so bad as I made out, and it certainly was a masterly stroke of business. Now I know where I am; and between us we'll keep this lamb of yours from falling into the jaws of the lioness. I'll think it over, and when I think over a thing, it is usually to some purpose. Good-bye, now. This has been quite a pleasant meeting, and you may kiss me, if you like—(I wish the new footman would come in and catch you at it; I don't believe he knows you are my brother)—there! Fly! Be off!" and she threw open the door.

He had to go, and he stumbled as he went down the staircase.

"Come again soon," she cried, from the landing.

"If I had only never come!" groaned he, beneath his breath.

For now his eyes were opened and he knew what he had done. In the solitude of his own chamber, beset by other cares and interests, it had seemed to his harassed and perturbed mind that to pursue some course which should relieve himself of a portion of responsibility while yet not wholly relinquishing all share of it, as concerned

Drax Rotherham and Charlotte Sunning, was indispensable, and the very reluctance he experienced in approaching Olivia misled him.

Surely it was his duty to speak to Olivia, knowing what he knew? She was his sister; and if by her mischievous instigation she was precipitating a catastrophe which he was using all his endeavours to avert, it must be, it could not fail to be, a right and proper course to point this out to her.

Especially when no other course was open. He did not need to be told that to speak to Rotherham would be useless. He had tried Charlotte, only to find himself equally foiled by her. What then could he do? Let things drift? The idea was intolerable.

He would have said it was intolerable for Rotherham's sake, but there was also a secret, scarcely suspected, feeling that Charlotte, so beautiful, so gifted, so richly endowed by Nature, so superior to the bulk of her sex in mental and intellectual faculties, would be thrown away upon Drax Rotherham.

If she could have loved him, loved him as such women have been known to love such men—blindly and loyally—the case would have been different; he could have stood aloof, telling himself that it was incomprehensible—perhaps, who knows, sighing a little over what might have been in his own case, had his path in life not been clearly marked out—but he would not have dreamed of interference.

It was the conviction that neither understood the other; that neither valued in the other that which was most remarkable and distinguishing; that Drax could not appreciate Charlotte's mind, nor she his character, which made their posing as lovers an unnatural farce in the eyes of their common friend.

. This he had endeavoured, with all the tact, delicacy,

and subtlety of which he was capable, to represent first to the one and then to the other.

He had failed with both and was at his wits' end, when, unhappily, the thought of his sister Olivia arose.

Olivia and Charlotte were, he understood, on such terms of intimacy as warranted his taking for granted the interest of the former in the welfare of the latter. Some foolish feminine rivalry between the two had been suffered to attain undue pre-eminence during the present tension of Charlotte's nerves; but Olivia, if it were shown her that this was an actual factor in an affair of such high importance, would easily contrive to do away with it, especially as her distaste for the match was certain.

It was not until he read his own conduct by the light of Olivia's triumph that he perceived in it anything reprehensible. Humbled and ashamed, he crept from her door with another step than that which bore him thither.

He had lowered himself in his own eyes. That was bad enough and sad enough; but he had also lowered himself in Olivia's. The spiritual part of his nature bewailed the first descent; its human side the last.

Until now he had never fully realised how rigidly careful he had always been before Olivia. Little weaknesses he would have owned to cheerfully, would have laughed at gaily in other company, had been kept out of her sight; and the indulgent friend, the delightful companion known to Tregillis, Drax Rotherham, and others of his own sex (Alban was more reserved with women) was the man apart in his sister's presence.

The prophet was now unveiled; a petty creature.

And in his self-enlightenment he perceived also that Olivia's phrase "a shabby trick" was still more terrible to him than her graver accusation. *It* went too far, there had been no 'confessional' in the matter.

But there had certainly been confidence, and as certainly he had betrayed the confidence; and more, it was reserved for Olivia, whose moral sense was—he could not bear to think what it was—to rebuke him! He felt low indeed.

And no more would he intermeddle with Drax Rotherham's affairs. Why should he? If a man nearly five-and-thirty years of age were not fit to manage for himself, he never would be, and there was no use trying to help him. He would have a bitter time of it with Charlotte, and he had not been unwarned; it was not as if the plunge had been taken in hot blood, before a voice had been raised to cry 'Beware!'—it was not as if——

"Yes, this is for the third time of asking," said a voice at his side. "Three times have I tried to attract your attention, Alban," and Mr. Drax Rotherham, a splendid figure, erect, joyous—wearing the indescribable air of a man fresh from an interview with the mistress of his heart—laughed heartily at the effect his words produced.

"What cruelty to break the chain of thought!" cried he. "How many miles away were you, most reverend sir? We shall know all about it on Sunday, eh?"

"As it happens, I wasn't thinking of my sermon," said Alban, colouring slightly, "though I own to being 'miles away,' and in consequence not fit to be walking along Pall Mall alone. Give me your arm"—taking it.

"This is always a pleasant time of day," said Drax, who looked as if he could have said the same of any time. "I am so glad I get away from the office earlier than I used to do. I always used to grudge the summer afternoons."

"What time do you get away?"

"Oh, when I choose. But it's hardly fair to be off before four on most days. Four is a very good hour in

June, though. Nobody does anything much before that."

"What have you been doing to-day?"

"Going about. I took the girls for a walk, and then to sit in the Park. I left them there."

"Couldn't induce them to come away even at this hour? I thought it was getting near dinner time, even for you swells," said Alban, consulting his watch. "And so it is. Half-past seven. Is the Park still full?"

"Oh I—I daresay they are in by now. It is some time since I parted from them. I grew tired of it." But there was nothing 'tired' in his voice, rather it rang with a blythe, exultant note, and Alban marked a smile upon the lips; a sick feeling stole over his own heart. Who and what was the counter-attraction which had proved stronger than the gay scene to which he had once or twice been beguiled, and with which on the only occasion of his going with Drax the latter had seemed so well content? Alban had sat with the Rotherhams; indulgent, but a little bored. He had said to himself that it was perhaps natural that the pretty girls and their brother should so frankly and thoroughly take pleasure in the scene; it was new to them, and they were not jaded and *blasées*. It especially pleased him to note Rotherham's simple enjoyment, and to see how unspoilt the good fellow was by prosperity and luxury. Tired? Not a bit of him, he was only tasting a dearer delight, something beside which the rest paled.

"No, thanks; I won't go in with you this evening," said Alban, quietly, as they reached a point where their ways separated, unless he accepted his friend's invitation to join the family party at dinner; and muttering something about work to do, he was gone; but not before he had marked, or fancied, that he was not urged to stay. He was right; his departure was a relief.

What had happened was this.

At breakfast-time the same day, Drax, inquiring into the family arrangements, and finding nothing particular in prospect, suggested plans of his own. How about the Horse Show? But it appeared that they were to go to the Horse Show on the morrow, escorted by Sir George Tregillis. "And he is to find out and tell us the best time," said Adeline, demurely. "He said he would look in about tea-time, and we thought we might perhaps wait to go out till afterwards. It would be cooler then;" for the weather was now very hot.

"All right," said her brother.

"We thought we might walk through the parks to *the* Park," struck in Evie, who knew what her sister wished her to say, "and sit there. We—we don't always care for driving."

Drax smiled to himself; he understood so very well now, and he was as well satisfied as they with the arrangement. People were more approachable, meetings more satisfactory on the thickly-covered lawn than on the front, where one had to look down and another to look up, and where there were interruptions and distractions every moment.

He soon had his little party arranged comfortably in a good place, and it was no drawback to him that a fourth chair could not immediately be found. He would stroll about in search of one.

When he returned, a boy behind him carried two, and Mr. Rotherham was piloting a lady whose appearance caused a thrill of excitement in the bosoms of his sisters.

She was *she*.

And she was coming towards them; and Drax was bringing her. Simultaneously they rose, expectant, their eyes now upon him, now upon his companion; and his few words of introduction, spoken rather low, might have

conveyed no information to their ears, so completely were they absorbed in their breathless sensations, had they not already been prepared for Miss Sunning's name.

"Oh, you did very well," said Drax, afterwards; "you looked at her as if she were the eighth wonder of the world, and she is accustomed to that." He did not add 'she likes that,' although he thought the feeling natural.

He placed his chairs, and then discovered that the one next Adeline was vacant, Sir George Tregillis having seen some friends and gone to speak to them; Addy's parasol had dropped, unconsciously of course, across the chair; but on its being demanded a few minutes later, for chairs were being snapped up everywhere the instant they were unoccupied, the parasol was withdrawn with a hurried timidity that amused Drax. Also it pleased him; he did not particularly want Tregillis to be by at their first meeting.

"I made your brother bring me here," said Charlotte, smiling round her—like a queen she looked, and like a queen she spoke—"I wanted so much to know you, and there has never been a chance before. My mother is coming, but I don't know when. May I sit with you for a little?"

But it was not for 'a little'. Passers-by tried in vain to engage the beautiful Miss Sunning's attention that afternoon.

Those who accosted her obtained only the briefest of replies, and found themselves obliged to move on beneath subsequent neglect; while the less resolute, hovering at a distance, ready to pounce the moment the party broke up, waited in vain.

"Don't look that way," whispered Charlotte, archly, as a group approached, headed by a portly dowager. "Keep your eyes on me, and let us be frightfully busy talking. That's an aunt of mine," she breathed in

Adeline's ear, "and she will swoop down upon us once her eagle eye——"

"Charlotte!"

"I was looking for you," continued Lady Henrietta, with obtuse disregard of a barricading parasol. "I was told we should find you here, but there is such a crowd, and not a chair to be had"—Addy was on her feet on the instant—"Oh, thank you, just for a moment," her ladyship dropped into it—"Charlotte, this young lady?——"

"Miss Rotherham," said Charlotte, with displeasure.

"Miss Rotherham, I am quite ashamed, but I am so tired hunting about. Kitty—Miss Rotherham."

By this time Drax was upright also, and Kitty, who knew him, was seated in his vacated chair.

"Perhaps some more could be found," suggested Lady Henrietta, settling down—for Alban had spoken to her of the Rotherhams, and she was ready to approve of them on his recommendation. With Drax, as we say, she had already a slight acquaintance, but his sisters were new to her and would be nice friends for Kitty, though, perhaps, a little young. But there were Sybil and Clara, who would soon be ready; and good, well-brought-up girls were scarce; and altogether Henny-Penny was intent on making the most of her opportunity.

"What disgusting luck!" muttered Charlotte, to herself. She disliked a large, talkative group of mixed people at the best of times; and now, when she had just got her little audience together, and Tregillis had cleared out—for, of course, she saw him go—it did annoy her to be fetched up short in this way. She would not stand it. A thought occurred.

"I suppose you have seen mother, aunt Hen?"

"My dear, I have seen nobody. George insisted upon

it that we were to get out of the carriage and come to sit here. He had seen you and——”

“So it is to George I owe the pleasure,” Charlotte looked at him, but he hastily looked away. “George!” she exclaimed, peremptorily.

“I suppose as you saw me, you saw my mother, too,” continued Charlotte in her clear, far-carrying voice; “now will you please take me to her?” and she rose rustling from her seat. “I have to go, aunt Hen, because I said I should. I *may* come back, but don’t wait. Mother knows about something we are doing to-night, and if I don’t catch her it may be too late; so George and I—oh, dear me, how stupid I am; George, you have not been introduced to Miss Eveline Rotherham”—he was standing by Evie, and what could be more natural?—“take my chair,” cried Charlotte, “and” (in his ear) “talk to that nice girl. No one need trouble about me,” and she was beyond recall in half a moment.

“Where are we going?” said Drax, at her side.

She took him home; it would have been nicer to stay out, to stroll up and down among the gay promenaders, or find another resting-place for themselves in some quieter part—but home was best.

“You can go back to your sisters as soon as you have seen me there, you know.”

“I have no need to go back to them,” said he, contentedly.

“Oh, poor things! Oh, but you must. They can’t be left there to bring themselves away. You ought not to have come with me if you mind going back.”

“Oughtn’t I? But I do mind it so much, that I arranged to escape it.”

“Really?”

He smiled, conscious of high strategy.

“Do tell me. When and how did you do it?”

"When you were speaking to your cousin. Directly you said to him that he was to take you to your mother, I said to myself, 'Not he, but I,' and there was a lady close by who lives a few doors from us, and who has always room in her carriage; I asked her to see after my sisters."

"How clever of you."

She was so pleased with him and with herself that she was in the highest spirits, and Lady Henrietta's mis-demeanour was forgiven. Rather it had conduced towards the present happy state of things. She had accomplished her main object of the afternoon before Henny-Penny came upon the scene, had inspected the Rotherham girls at close quarters, and found them not so bad as they might have been. They were 'shy and gauche, but not objectionable, not even very ill-dressed, not so ill-dressed as Kitty Dimsdale, for example. It must be owned that Charlotte thought no one really understood dress but herself, and she would have told you that her cousin neither knew what to wear nor how to wear it. Kitty never saw that a smart frock might be soiled and crushed and yet smart, while another, new and fashionable according to a second-rate dressmaker, would be quite too awful for words, though on for the first time.

Nothing would alter Kitty; but the glances of admiration in the eyes of Addy and Evie Rotherham were signs of grace, and if she were to have the handling of them they might be decently turned out.

A short time before Charlotte would not have said 'if'. She had made up her mind that the future as regarded Mr. Rotherham only rested with herself, attaching possibly more importance to his immediate response to her summons than it warranted; but she discovered ere long that the first Drax so easily won had given place to a

more guarded and experienced personage, by no means her echo as his predecessor had been.

Formerly, all she had had to be careful of was offending his native instincts and inborn prejudices ; whereas now he dared to dissent on matters as to which he could have had no previous opinion. Occasionally he was not to be argued down.

But to meet this new development, Charlotte herself put into practice new charms and graces ; she gained in patience, discrimination, and womanly sweetness ; she was quick to detect and meet the slightest cloud on Rotherham's brow ; she avoided every unsavoury topic.

No breath of scandal passed her lips. There were no allusions and innuendos such as had perplexed him and marred his ideal in the days when he would fain have beheld it, flawless. In short, she was more bewitching than ever, and though shy and watchful to begin with, day by day he drew nearer to her feet again.

And he showed this more plainly than he had yet done on the present lovely summer evening when, before the eyes of all, he walked away from all by Charlotte's side.

They were a superb match ; each the faultless counterpart of the other ; each the personification of youth, and health, and beauty. Eyes followed them as they emerged from the fashionable crowds, and crossed over to the other side of the carriage drive ; and there were some among those careless spectators who recollected afterwards what Charlotte Sunning looked like that day.

An empty victoria turned away from the door of the little house in Charles Street as the two approached ; but although it was her mother's, there was no one in the drawing-room to which Charlotte led the way, nor were there any interruptions during Rotherham's visit, despite the length of its duration. The sun was low in the west when he overtook his friend Alban in Pall Mall.

Scarcely was the former again alone, and he had only a few yards further to go to reach his own door, when Sir George Tregillis emerged from it, and came quickly towards him.

"Followed the rest of your party home to tell them—hum!—ha! well no, I didn't do anything of the sort, and that's a fact," said he, with a little nervous laugh. "I came along because I thought I should find *you*, and there was something—I say, Rotherham, you know I'm an awful duffer, but all the same I have been about London a little longer than you have, and I thought perhaps—perhaps——"

"All right," said Rotherham, with the utmost good-humour; he felt so gay he would have said 'All right' to anything. "What breach of London etiquette have I been guilty of? I might break its laws a dozen times a day and not have an idea of it."

"It's not that exactly. Not exactly;" Tregillis stroked his broad, red chin, and pulled up the collar which encased it. "Oh, you're all right, you're all right; only there are certain things and people that only *we* know about, and as you are now one of *us* I thought I'd give you the hint. Of course Miss Sunning is——"

"Miss Sunning!" He stepped back and stared.

"We all know Charlotte," proceeded Sir George, more fluently, "and for us men she is a charming creature. I admire her most awfully, and she never looked more stunning than to-day; but I have no sisters——" he paused, significantly.

"You would not introduce Miss Sunning to them if you had?"

"Well——" a long pause. "No," said Sir George.

"That's a pity," said Rotherham, coldly, "as I have invited her to join our party to the Horse Show to-morrow."

CHAPTER XIII.

"I SAID TO MYSELF 'SHE IS COME'."

ALTHOUGH we have endeavoured to present in these pages something of Charlotte's immediate environment, it in no sense indicates the extent and vastness of her social territory.

Our readers must not be misled by the last words of Sir George Tregillis. Impetuous as ever, he was now on the high moral tack, and having decided in his own mind to ally himself with the Rotherham family, the idea of Charlotte's doing the same was, it can well be imagined, unpalatable from every point of view. Still smarting from previous experiences, he thought and spoke vindictively—not as he would have thought and spoken a year before.

In other eyes Charlotte was still at her zenith, and every door stood open to her among such doors as she chose to enter. She could, as she always could, pick and choose among the houses, not only of the smart but of the great.

The most exclusive dowagers of Mayfair and Belgravia were at her beck and call when she desired to be chaperoned, telling each other that the mother was an impossible person, but that a conventional inquiry disposed of her existence. Widows were often in delicate health; it was a kindness to take their daughters off their hands.

Charlotte could make or mar an event; and the

hobby of a great lady could be the thing of the moment or not, according to the pressure brought to bear upon it by the all-powerful favourite.

Mrs. Sunning, to whom her sister-in-law was a personage, found something almost blasphemous in the way Lady Henrietta's prestige would be ignored by her niece.

"Go with Henny-Penny to M—— House!" she would cry, shrilly. "Go with my washerwoman! My dear," with lofty condescension, "I would sooner go with *you*."

"You are truly kind, Charlotte."

"You know what I mean. One can't consider relationships; I always bring you in when I can, as I have told you before, and you do very well in your own sphere. But you can't fly to my spheres; no more can Henny."

"Dear Charlotte has such wonderful strength," Mrs. Sunning always fell back on Charlotte's muscular development when questioners were tiresome. "No one person can take her *everywhere*, and I have many kind allies."

"That does very well;" Charlotte would nod approbation on knowing this.

She was now in her fourth season, and reaping all the fruits of previous ones in an increased circle of acquaintance and wider field of action.

An opera box which had once been good enough was so no longer; she would not be seen on a coach which had been gladly mounted hitherto.

To herself she might indeed confess, as we know she did, the uncertainty of her present foothold, and admit that through the glittering maze of the present there loomed the future, not without its menace; but this—it was with her eye upon this that Charlotte, in the fulness of her effulgence and meridian of her glory, paused to meditate.

She could, of course, go on as she was doing ; it would be a vast deal easier to go on than to stop. Nights and days of pleasure flew round with noiseless wings, bearing her on their breast without an effort of her own—but to yield unresistingly to their seductions meant, emphatically meant, a surrender of another kind. Drax Rotherham was not 'in society'..

What was worse, he was resolved not to be in it. At first she could hardly believe him in earnest in making known this determination, but he had shown he was so, and thereby half pleased, half annoyed her. Nothing could be more desirable than a present reluctance to enter the gay world—her world—but again if such disinclination were persisted in, it might be awkward. She would not argue the point.

So well indeed did she keep in the background the sound of her own endlessly whirring wheels, that Drax had not a notion of the extent to which she went out night after night among gay haunts whereof he knew nothing. Not that their existence was ignored, but it was touched upon lightly, as a matter of no consequence, subordinate to other and more engrossing interests. Books, pictures, music, the affairs of nations—all had their turn. Religion itself was not left out.

"Miss Sunning does not really care for gaiety," Drax assured his sisters ; "only as we do—in moderation." He must know, he added, catching a glance between the two, he had it from herself.

"But she goes," said Adeline, doubtfully.

"Oh, she goes. Of course. She has been brought up to it. Some people are."

"You think it is her mother, do you, Drax?"

"Her mother and the rest of them. We don't understand that sort of thing, but people who are accustomed to it all their lives take it as a matter of course."

"Mr. Alban says——"

"Alban knows nothing about it," said Drax, quickly. "I don't say he's not perfectly right, and I agree with him entirely about what he calls a life of pleasure—for myself. I should hate it, so it is no temptation to me; but he can't realise, it isn't likely that he should, how a girl feels. Miss Sunning is hedged in by family traditions, and it would give a great deal of offence among her relations, and hurt and displease those who love her best, and whom she has no *right* to affront" (it was easy to perceive who had supplied the argument) "if she were to refuse to join in their amusements."

"Yes, yes; of course. Only——"

"Isn't that reason enough?"

"Kitty Dimsdale says she hardly ever sees her cousin in the season. She said that day in the Park, 'Charlotte is far too grand for any of *our* parties'."

Drax bit his lip.

"There are two sides to every story. Miss Sunning tells me that the Dimsdales' parties are——" he broke off short. What Charlotte had said would hardly bear repetition.

"Are what?" said Addy, inquisitively. She and Evie had been highly elated by receiving a card that very morning for one of Lady Henrietta's 'At Homes,' and wondered not a little what it would be like, and whom they should meet there. It seemed to them that every second person would be a somebody.

"She meant that they were a little dull. Oh, I dare say *we* shall enjoy them."

He knew he should. What did he not enjoy the moment that Charlotte, like a star, arose in his firmament?

"Of course, I shall go on Thursday," she had said, speaking of the prospective evening. "I'll go, if only to look after your sisters."

"While I look after you?"

He understood he was to be allowed to look after her.

When he brought home the card of invitation (for Charlotte gave it him, having always a dozen or two, she said, for friends, and before Drax's face she threw the remainder into the waste-paper basket), he took from his pocket at the same time two velvet jewel-cases. He had stopped at Spink's by the way, and purchased for each sister a diamond pendant.

"They are not of my choosing," said he, gaily, as the two threw themselves upon him all gratitude and rapture, "some one who has better taste than I chose them."

"*Not?*—— Oh, Drax!"

"I asked her what was the correct thing, and she said I should be sure to make a bungle of it—as I should. She and her mother were just going to drive out, so they took me in their victoria, and we looked over a lot, and chose together." There was a glow on his cheek and in his eye as he pronounced the word 'together'.

He looked back upon a delightful half-hour. Mrs. Sunning sat without while the selection was being made, inflated with joy and pride, only wishing it were another purchase over which the consultation within was taking place. Drax Rotherham was transformed in her eyes; and while she had always admired his appearance almost angry with it, now she followed every movement with delight. Rotherham had a figure which was his tailor's joy; his height, his proportions were perfect; the straight, flat back, somewhat sloping shoulders, and small waist set off a frock-coat to admiration; and the desire to find favour in the eyes of his mistress induced a dormant dandyism to be bold and proclaim itself.

"Now you have only got to tip your hat a very little on one side," said Charlotte. It was the days when hats were so worn: the effect was curiously becoming.

"An' my eye, 'e do 'ave 'ats now!" quoth pudding-faced footman John, who was still in residence in Charles Street, too useful to Charlotte to be let go, though of mean reputation in other respects. "'Ere's a change!" cried John, knowing about it as well as other folks. The servile creature cringed before Rotherham's authoritative air—unconsciously it had grown authoritative—and as for the frequency of his door-bell, he might have stood there ringing all night, and been borne no grudge.

All John wanted to know was when the engagement was coming off. So also did others, Lady Henrietta among them.

"I am sure dear Charlotte has chosen wisely *this* time," cried she, as if to 'choose' were Charlotte's daily habit. "We can all approve of Mr. Rotherham—even George."

George had given it as his opinion that Rotherham was not a bad sort—the fact being that he did not now care twopence about Drax or any other of his cousin's admirers. He had got girls of his own, who were better to him than Charlotte had ever been; girls who wouldn't sit upon a fellow, and make fun of him, and give themselves airs to him. He had a Dulcibella who was every bit as pretty as Charlotte, and who laughed at the idea of Charlotte's being so very much superior to other people. Dulcibella could name three or four other girls who could, if they chose, get themselves made the same fuss about, and only didn't because—oh, because it wasn't worth while. It was too much of a fag; it meant such awfully hard work; every one knew that Charlotte Sunning worked herself to death.

"And I say, you know, she does," added George, recounting this.

So that he was quite easy in his mind when in the family circle hints respecting the prospective engagement were let fall; whereat Lady Henrietta would smile significantly, and essay a little mild maternal banter:—

"So you have found out at last that Charlotte is too old for you? But really I think she looks younger than she did. I was almost afraid she was beginning to look a little worn towards the close of last season, she went out so very much, and it must tell in the long run; but I fancy she has had a quiet winter, and certainly she is as fresh as a rose now."

"Dulcie says it's not *rose* but *rouge*," let slip George, incautiously.

"Then Dulcie had better learn to hold her tongue," cried her ladyship, reddening in a manner that freed herself from any such aspersion. "Dulcie is a chatter-box; and very impertinent to make such a remark on a relation of yours. I wonder at your allowing it, George!"

"Can't help a girl's saying what she pleases, mother. But you are so beastly old-fashioned. Dulcie meant no harm"—and he hastily changed the subject.

The next time Lady Henrietta was in her niece's company, she could not resist a prying glance, and nothing more was said about Miss Dulcibella's impertinence.

"But marriage, especially such a marriage as this, would set all *that* right," reflected the fond Henny-Penny, who was a rigid optimist where Charlotte was concerned. "Poor dear, she does too much; is up too late every night; and never gives herself even the rest others take by going out of Town on Sundays. No wonder she gets pale and puts on a little—a little—colour. It is wonderful, quite wonderful, that, with it all,

Charlotte goes so often now to church on Sunday evenings. Alban's doing, of course. And he is a friend of Mr. Rotherham. Oh, she would be surrounded by good influences, if only this most excellent, admirable, suitable marriage should take place."

To help it on, as she conceived, Henny gave a party—the party to which reference has already been made. And when the Rotherham trio appeared (as they did unconscionably early, though they thought it late), they were told again and again that it was so nice to have a little talk with them before the crush began. Sir Herbert was introduced, and was ponderously cordial. He was most happy to have the opportunity of, etc., etc. He escorted first one little shivering girl and then the other round the picture gallery, and through the back rooms thrown open for the occasion. When he had to hasten away to greet other arrivals, he plucked George by the elbow, and desired him to find Miss Rotherham a seat—a good seat—near the music.

George, in his turn, presented Ferox major—the redoubtable Ferox having, like himself, been recently emancipated, and introduced to London drawing-rooms—and meantime Kitty had found a friend for Eveline.

"I have introduced little May Barnstaple to her," whispered she, on her way back to the door. "May knows nobody here either."

Rotherham meantime was kept beside his hostess, and begged not to go within and lose himself.

"There are several coming who would like to know you," said Lady Henrietta, who had promised the family generally that he should be on view. "My people always come early—ah, here is my dear brother," as a florid, white-waistcoated individual turned the corner of the staircase, furtively stroking down the few hairs on either side of his ears. "Algernon, so good of you to come.

Let me present Mr. Rotherham." Then to him, "Lord Claybury"—her eagerness plainly manifesting that this was no ordinary introduction. But as if to prevent any possibility of its still being deemed such, "Charlotte's uncle," she further whispered to Drax. Even he smiled.

But he liked it, liked the very significance of it, and what might have repelled another man so situated had no ill effect on him. The uncle proved to be an easy creature, a duplex of Henrietta herself, and having come to his sister's house for the sole purpose of inspecting 'the fortunate youth' who, he heard at the clubs, was shaping to become his nephew, he scarcely made any more effort to conceal it than she did.

"He'll do first-rate, Henrietta," said he, afterwards.

As this was the principal relation for whose benefit Mr. Rotherham had been retained at the head of the staircase, and as the others did not follow as soon as expected, he was presently let go, and found his way to his own party, pleased to find them comfortable and in conversation with others. Miss Barnstaple seemed a nice little girl; and her mother, a quiet country lady, presided over the group.

From their corner by the piano they looked out upon the hubbub with the irresponsible interest of spectators; and it was only when the rooms grew so full as to block their view of the in-coming stream, that a move was projected.

"We might take a turn up and down," suggested Drax to his sister Adeline. "That is, if you care about it? If you would rather stay where you are, I'll go and——" he stopped short.

"Oh, there is Miss Sunning!" exclaimed little May Barnstaple. "Mother——" eagerly behind backs, "mother—Miss Sunning," indicating with a motion of her head.

"*The Miss Sunning?* But where, my dear?" Lady Barnstaple's eyeglass was up in an instant. "Where, May, where?"

"I just caught sight of her." May rose and peered, then subsided again; "I know it was she. Kitty pointed her out to me in a shop a few days ago. Kitty said she would be here to-night."

"I should certainly like to see her," murmured the sober matron, half to herself, half to her nearest companion, who chanced to be Rotherham; "Miss Sunning, I daresay you know who I mean? A relation of the Dimsdales, and a great London beauty, they tell me."

"There—there she is again! Look, mother; you can't help seeing her now," cried May. "And isn't she lovely? Isn't she wonderful? . . . She always comes late. Kitty says she goes to a dozen other places first" . . . breathlessly ejecting each sentence. "And she won't stay long. She just walks through the rooms and shows herself. But—oh! she's coming this way."

She was, and every eye was upon her.

George Dimsdale, who had been very merry and content with his *Dulcibella* hitherto, broke off in the middle of what he was saying, and stared at the advancing figure, before whose dazzling beauty and splendour his charmer paled into insignificance.

Dulcie herself craned her neck to obtain a better view.

A small procession had formed itself, and was by slow degrees moving up the centre of the principal saloon. One and another stepped forward from obscurity to join it; some content to be recognised by Charlotte, but the bolder clinging resolutely to her side.

"She had always a crowd about her," murmured little May Barnstaple.

"It's all dress." *Dulcibella* recovered herself, and

turned to her adherent. "She does dress divinely, of course. Oh, yes, please go. You really ought," ironically, "your cousin has no one to attend to her, and she knows so few people!"

"I only said that as one of the family——"

"Don't I tell you to go? There, you have let that Brown boy cut in before you! Look at them all. How utterly ridiculous!" And Miss Dulcie rattled her fan with scornful energy.

"Why don't you go to lick her boots, too?" demanded she, as he still lingered.

"Because she has got her own proper boot-licker, and now she has found him," retorted George, suddenly bursting out laughing, and quite happy again. "I say, that was a joke. Didn't you see what it was all about? It was Rotherham she was looking for; and he was away over there, hidden behind the curtain. He is going in for her, you know; but he didn't choose to be mixed up with the rabble, and lay low, knowing she would go to him if he didn't go to her. What? You don't know Rotherham? That's he, talking to Charlotte now."

Dulcibella looked and made no remark.

"He's an awfully fine looking fellow," pursued young Dimsdale, magnanimously. "We all approve of him for Charlotte—plus the money. And he's the right age, too. Charlotte's getting on," by way of conciliation.

"Of course. Two-and-twenty to you *boys*——" and here the suspended flirtation, in which we have no further interest, was resumed.

"You were long in coming," said Drax, in a low, tender voice to his beloved.

At her hint he had drawn her aside, and they had passed from view, secluding themselves behind a veil of flowers and gauzy draperies, arranged to suit such requirements upon the carpeted balcony outside. As he

spoke, Rotherham made no concealment of the love within his eyes.

"I knew you were there before I saw you," continued he. "There was not a sign or sound, and yet I said to myself 'She is come'. You arrived by the other doorway?"

"My uncle took me, shall I confess it? to get a little supper first. I was so famished, Mr. Rotherham. I was at the opera—such a long opera—'Lohengrin,' and we had to dine early, and I eat next to nothing. So, when I arrived, I just sent up for uncle Dimsdale to give me a private reinforcement."

"Quite right. You had a good opera?"

"No, I hated it. I wanted to get here, but the tiresome Duchess would have me sit by her, and watched like a lynx for any signs of restiveness. Once before, when I went away a little early, she as good as told me that it was waste of a seat. The thing was nearly over, but she always sits to the bitter end. And one has to be so careful when the opera is in question, because, you see, we hapless beings who 'go poverty' can't afford boxes for ourselves."

"Are they so very expensive?"

Charlotte smiled.

"I have always heard so," said Drax, simply, "and I think it is quite fair they should be. The best of its kind, whatever it is, ought to be well paid for."

"Yes, indeed."

"I suppose one need not go every night, even if one had a box," pursued he. He was not particularly musical, but willing to indulge others. "People would be glad to be lent it occasionally, I daresay?"

"But you need only have one for two or three nights a week," interposed she, eagerly. "No one wants to go every night, and it is quite usual to——"

"But why not have the box, and lend it?"

"So extravagant, sir; that's why."

"If I have one, I should have it for my friends as well as for myself. I should like most awfully to lend it about. I should—but this is boring you?"

"Not at all. You mean——"

"That next season I intend to have one. You have told me so much about the pleasure musical people take in the opera, that if I can give that pleasure, I will. But—that is——"

She saw what was in his mind, and dropped her eyes. She certainly proposed to include her own opera-box in the programme of the future, so why should he hum and haw about it? Her approval, of course, was what he was anxious to obtain; why then not ask for it and use it as a peg whereon to hang all the rest?—but she had unwittingly repelled his tender mood, and it had shrunk within itself again.

A few minutes before, his breast was swelling with proud and fond emotions, and even the vicinity of the gay throngs and the occasional scrutiny of passing couples seeking retirement like themselves, scarcely sufficed to hold him in check; he felt he must speak. The stirring strains of the music, the talk and laughter which rippled incessantly within earshot, were not, indeed, the whispering winds among poplar trees—nor was the lamp-lit alcove, with the shouting and crashing of carriages below, the willowy river-edge, with a shrouded landscape sunk in silence round—but there was the same throbbing of the heart within, and one word, one look from her, or better still the silence dear to lovers, in response to the overflowing tenderness of his murmured reproach, would have sufficed to open the floodgates.

She had heard him as though she heard him not!

It in no whit discomposed her to avow that, whereas he was enduring torments of expectancy in which every minute seemed an age, she was satisfying her material appetite, unable even to wait for the general opening of the supper-room.

What could he do but descend to the same level, and that as quickly as might be?

And he did it well, and there was nothing to be gathered from his smooth prolongation of an ordinary topic; Charlotte had no conception that the question of the opera-box had been settled beforehand, and merely served its turn as a conversational opening on the present occasion.

Charlotte was in excellent spirits and temper—quails and champagne were fortifying—and having produced all her usual effect at Lady Henrietta's reception, she settled with herself that Henny's performance would be creditably rounded off by being the scene of her engagement to Drax Rotherham. It would be a reward for Henny, who was really a good soul. "Come on, Drax," cried she, internally.

Clever as she was she could not see why he refused to 'come on,' nor perceive the wound she had inflicted, which was not to be healed on the instant. He was back in the old days, wondering and hesitating; already seeing all his present happiness dissolve like a soap-bubble, and a bitter blank beyond. He saw himself reading a little perfumed note on a dreary, dusty summer morning, and heard the flies buzzing on the window-panes, and the office doors opening and shutting, and his own name—— He wakened with a start, Charlotte was rallying him on his abstraction. He turned and gazed at her. Oh! if he only knew!

"Here you are!" cried a gay voice through the doorway about half-an-hour thereafter; "I thought you must

have gone, Charlotte;" and a smart little figure, blazing with jewels, stepped into view.

"What a charming *retraite*," continued Mrs. Jephson, laughing and looking over her shoulder to a bushy individual behind, her cavalier for the nonce.

Charlotte's brow darkened, but she laughed back: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's *retraite*, Olivia."

"But I do; oh, pray—I did not mean *that*," to Rotherham, who rose, as he could not avoid doing. "That is no good, you know," pursued the little lady, twisting and turning from one to the other, "if Miss Sunning sits still——"

"Which Miss Sunning emphatically does. And please, it is very warm, and there is very little air to be had," Charlotte nodded suggestively, "and there being no policeman to say 'Move on,' suppose——"

"You wretch! Isn't she brutal?" again Olivia appealed to her own satellite. "And to me who have been hunting for her up and down, and in and out" (a smile on Charlotte's face), "and all to do her a good turn! It would serve you right, you ungrateful person, if I didn't do it."

"Don't! Good turns are odious things."

"Will you or won't you take a lift in my brougham to the Mitchams' ball?" She had a shrewd suspicion that Rotherham knew nothing of the Mitchams' ball. She had already obtained an introduction to his sisters through the innocent Kitty Dimsdale, and found Lady Mitcham's very name unknown to them; then and there the idea had arisen of offering Charlotte a convoy before their brother's face. Charlotte was sometimes glad enough of such. Would she accept it now?

"No, I won't," said Charlotte, calmly.

"Without even a thank you!"

"Without even a d——" She was just in time. An-

other moment and the temptation to cap the retort with another, which can be supplied by such as choose, might have proved too strong.

"Oh fie! Oh, shocking! *I* know what you meant to say." Olivia, with her fan to her lips, sparkled over the top of it to her own man, and peeped to see how Rotherham was looking at the same time. "Charlotte, I am ashamed for these gentlemen to hear. Count Boris, Miss Sunning would have liked to say a very, very naughty word, I assure you she would, beginning with a D. I saw her lips forming for it. In your country ladies are never naughty, are they? No, I thought not. Well, come along, and you shall tell me about them. Good-bye, Charlotte. Anyhow, I shall meet you at the ball, you dear, wicked, witty creature," and satisfied, she took herself and her count away at last.

"Mr. Rotherham," said Charlotte, in a low voice.

He gazed at her bewildered; the whole scene had bewildered him.

"Did you——" she hesitated, "did you understand?"

He shook his head.

"She calls herself my *friend*." No words could express the indescribable bitterness of her tone. "Those are the sort of friends I live among. Those are the sort of tongues that have me at their mercy. . . . You know that woman's brother? He is one of the saints on earth—I am in earnest, don't look at me so—and she—she would contaminate heaven itself. Some of us are made so. There are black sheep in every fold, and Olivia Jephson must have been born jet-black. Why do I know her? I can't help knowing her, I can't help knowing others like her. They pursue me and hedge me in on every side, and I can't escape; I being also born to it. But oh, how I hate them all!" A sudden sigh, a blast of sincerity; she clasped her hands, and

threw back her beautiful head ; he could see the fluctuations of her throat.

Something he murmured, but he knew not what.

"Mrs. Jephson saw me here with you," Charlotte proceeded, rapidly, after a minute's silence ; "she knows you and yours are not of our world—our heartless, pitiless world—and she cannot bear that I should form any friendship with people who—who might make me different from what I am and from what she is. That was why she came here to-night. To try to get me away from you. Or to provoke me to say something—what *did* I say?" she suddenly demanded. "Nothing. Not a word, but Olivia Jephson saw that—I can't help hearing phrases and they will rise in my mind—I am so fearfully quick, yet I never said it——"

"But what was it you did not say?"

"Well, it was 'Damn you!'" said Charlotte, quite shyly. "You see it would have been so very pat. She cried out 'Without even a thank you!' and if I had cried back 'Without even a——' See? And now she will repeat that wherever she goes, and it doesn't matter how sorry I am, and that I never said it besides," proceeded the fair penitent, her spirits rising beneath a twinkle in his eye, "it will get about all the same that Charlotte Sunning swears. Lots of girls do, you know," quickly, "but I don't. Indeed, I don't. I should really like to be—to be very particular if—if I knew how."

It was not to be. Even the touch of reality which mingled with her wondrous acting, and gave to it a fervour and a poignancy that might have proved irresistible at another time, failed to bring about the desired result on the present occasion. He sympathised and comforted, but he did not say "Find your refuge from all this in my arms," and, finally, Charlotte grew cross.

"How late it is! We have stayed here an unconscionable time. Your little sisters ought to be in bed by now, Mr. Rotherham. Come along and find them," and she hurried him back to the drawing-room.

It was nearly empty, and Addie and Evie forlornly huttering together at the far end, with a vast space between them and such as remained, looked round relieved at their approach. All the people they knew had gone, and they were themselves longing to go, and, though unwilling to think so, tired out.

"Take them home, take them home," cried Charlotte. "No, don't bother about me, thanks. I shall just stop a minute behind everybody, for a little relation talk—the Dimsdales expect that sort of thing," and she plunged into the midst of them.

But directly the Rotherhams' carriage drove from the door, a hansom was called for Miss Sunning; and ten minutes later there was a rush out upon the landing at Lady Mitcham's ball. Who had arrived?

Charlotte.

CHAPTER XIV.

"I MUST SPEAK AT LAST."

EVERY trace of vexation and ennui had vanished from her countenance.

She did not, indeed, assume the quasi-royal airs which had made her entry into her uncle's house so imposing and effective—*there* it was her business to impress a heterogeneous assemblage—but at Lady Mitcham's she was on her own ground, and her eyes sparkled with pure enjoyment.

Mrs. Sunning, who had been patiently waiting on the ground floor, her presence having been dispensed with at Henny-Penny's, had a brief moment of keen expectation when her daughter appeared. She had never seen Charlotte more radiant—something *must* have happened. But if so, where was Mr. Rotherham? Surely he would have come on to the ball; surely he would have been made welcome there, if—but a second glance dispelled the illusion.

"You are so late," she murmured.

"Late? Oh, no," said Charlotte, carelessly. "I had to stop a decent time, or the Rotherhams would have wondered. They knew nobody, poor souls, and it was a charity to look after them." This as she was taking off her cloak, Mrs. Sunning having followed her into the cloak-room. The latter drew nearer.

"I almost expected you to bring him with you, Charlotte."

"He has gone home to bed, my dear. Balls are not in his line. But keep up your heart, it's all right;" and they went upstairs.

Lady Mitcham's was one of the few very smart houses to which our very smart young lady's mother was invited, and she would not have missed coming on the present occasion for the world; she had even given up her sister-in-law's reception, which was ordinarily one of the events of her season, in order to be at her best for the ball.

"Certainly if you can't do both, do the Mitchams," Charlotte said. The widow reluctantly owned that she could not do both—comfortably. She was therefore found waiting immaculate in the hall of the great mansion in Chesterfield Gardens as the clock struck one, and had her reward at last.

There was, as we have said, an immediate sensation.

Miss Sunning had come!—Charlotte had come!—Charlotte was on the staircase!—She was talking to Lady Mitcham.

Lady Mitcham was violent in her reproaches.

"You shockingly rude, bad girl, what do you mean by such behaviour? Every one asking, 'Where is Charlotte?' and I vowing and protesting you were somewhere, and sending people to look, knowing quite well that they might look till Doomsday in vain! How dare you put me in such straits?"

"Here I am," said Charlotte, placidly.

"Oh, to be sure; and looking like a goddess. And now I shall see no more of you, for they are all gaping like hungry wolves inside; but anyhow, I have quieted my conscience. Your mother," looking round, "yes, Colonel Blake, do—do take Mrs. Sunning down to supper. Find her a nice place and something good to eat. Charlotte——" but Charlotte had disappeared.

For the next hour she danced diligently, feeling more in the mood for dancing than flirting. It was an odd thing, but she did not really care to flirt just after a meeting with Rotherham, and yet she was often vexed and impatient with him. While he sat by her side, he fretted her by his seriousness and the necessity of adapting her style of conversation to his; also she had to be continually on her guard, more especially of late, since Alban's influence became manifest—a year before, Drax would not have felt as he did on many subjects.

And yet Charlotte, to do her justice, perceived that the alteration was an improvement. She liked the sturdy smile of negation better than the weak smile of acquiescence. Drax Rotherham was twenty-fold more of a man than before; and though something was certainly due to the extraordinary change in his fortunes, she had a sufficiently keen insight to perceive that these had in no wise affected his character. It had been and was being strengthened by other means.

A purpose had entered his life. He was no longer to be held a mere inoffensive being, whose motto was 'Live and let live'; he was intent upon carrying into effect aims and projects which could have but one origin; and while a conviction of this at times disconcerted herself in a high degree, at others it acted as a stimulant.

It made her lover infinitely more interesting. He did not pall upon her, as at first she had been terribly afraid he would do.

And she was sure of another thing: his feelings, as regarded herself, had gained in proportion as others deepened and strengthened. The capacity for loving had grown. There was an intelligent appreciation which had not been there before.

Sometimes she allowed herself to speculate as to

whether it would be possible to make a trial, a bare trial, of religion in the form presented by Rotherham. It did not seem disagreeable.

To return to the ball. Charlotte being in waltzing and not in amatory vein, her admirers had perforce to let her have her way; and her energy infecting others, the evening assumed a new aspect from the moment she, in old-fashioned phrase, 'took the floor'.

"'Pon my word, that girl's strength is perfectly awful," protested a partner, who had been whirled till his head was dizzy and his unaccustomed and disgusted toes tingling. "I *can't* dance. Never could. Hate it. And I'm so deadly tired," sinking into a seat, "that I'm as limp as a dead rat. Can't any one stop her?" and Lord Robert stretched himself at full length.

"Poor Bobby!" sympathised a friend.

"Oh, it's all very well to say 'Poor Bobby'; you would feel 'poor' yourself if you had been in Miss Sunning's clutches for half-an-hour."

"No, no! Come, Bobby, draw it mild; you didn't have Miss Sunning for half-an-hour, you only had your turn like the rest of us. Don't be grasping, Bobby."

"My turn, good heavens! I tell you she wouldn't let me go——"

"She is so jolly short of partners, isn't she?"

"I never said she was short of partners," sulkily.

"Nor that you couldn't get a second look-in, though you grovelled for it. Heard you, Bobby."

"I'm going to sleep," said Bobby, shutting his eyes.

Charlotte was a beautiful dancer.

"The dear child would dance by herself if she had no one else," said Mrs. Sunning, who had now been handed over by Colonel Blake to another of her daughter's elderly admirers, and escorted by the latter to a seat commanding the ball-room. "The exercise,

you know. She sleeps so much better afterwards when she has had a nice evening's exercise."

"She looks as if she always slept well," said he.

"She is so healthy. But the London season is a strain. I am sure what Charlotte goes through——"

"When you're young you can stand any amount. You and I, Mrs. Sunning," the old fellow was a dozen years her senior, and knew it, "the pace begins to tell at our age; I was as indefatigable as your daughter a little while ago."

"You don't mean to say that *you* mind anything, Sir William? Oh, you mustn't get *lazy* before your time," and the widow shook her head archly. "We poor women get nerves and all sorts of horrors; but you great, strong men——"

She had the padded, strapped, rickety old club dandy by her side for the rest of the evening.

"Well now, I think we may as well be off," said Charlotte, coming up at last, as daylight streamed through chinks of the curtains, and a pale world grew into being without; "well, mother, had a good time? Respects to you, Sir William."

"Miss Sunning has had a good time herself, I hope?" bowed he, gallantly. "Lady Mitcham ought to be on her knees to the fair magician who, by the touch of her wand, transformed the ball. Between ourselves, it was dragging consumedly before a certain presence infused new life into it, and I wouldn't swear that I didn't see yawns. That was three hours ago."

"So for three hours the yawners have been reviling me!" retorted Charlotte. "Gracious! I had better fly. Come along, mum."

Mrs. Sunning was only too ready to 'come along'. She would have told you that she had enjoyed herself extremely—and this may have been the case for a brief

period after her arrival—but since then had intervened a dreary, interminable amount of Blake or Blunt, according as one or other of the old fellows took up position by her side; while her only variety had been a curt recognition by an occasional passer-by, or the interchange of a remark with her daughter at longer and longer intervals.

No wonder that she had sat up more and more stiffly in her chair, feeling more and more disconsolate as the hours passed, and quite possibly regretting in her heart that for this she had given up the happier hunting-ground in which she might have disported herself.

At Henrietta's reception she would have babbled merrily, and permeated the rooms freely; but here she was stuck like a leech to one spot, and reduced to Blake's and Blunt's wearilities. (It was Charlotte who called them 'Wearilities'; Charlotte was fond of inventing words.)

"Poor thing! You do look rather the wuss," consoled the latter, as they went downstairs, Sir William skipping and hopping to avoid the trains behind. "You must have been most awfully bored. I did poke outside, to see if I couldn't find some other old white-waistcoat to amuse you; but I couldn't. They were scarce to-night."

"Oh, never mind, my dear; I did very well. Sir William was really——"

"I saw. Nailed himself to your chair. You shall invite him to something as a reward. Now, let's be quick. I had no idea there were so few left," glancing round.

"I heard several say they were staying on only because you did," whispered Mrs. Sunning. "See, they are all following us down."

"Do you want anything to eat before you go, mum?"

Through the doorway of the dining-room came the

sound of voices and clinking of glasses, most of the remaining guests having turned in thither; but Mrs. Sunning shook her head, too tired even for food; and hastily donning their cloaks she and Charlotte joined those awaiting their carriages in the outer hall.

A bank of feathery palms divided this space from a lounge wherein reclined in various attitudes men whose duties were over, or who had contrived to evade their further discharge.

"Don't look that way," whispered Charlotte. Then, laughing, "They are no beauties, any more than we, at four o'clock in the morning."

"No, I daresay not," and Mrs. Sunning hastily drew a lace scarf yet further over her brow. "Don't you wear anything?" subjoined she, for Charlotte's head was uncovered.

But Charlotte did not hear the question.

The departing crowd had pressed her so close to the green bank above mentioned, that her ear had caught the sound of a familiar voice behind it, and what Sir George Tregillis was saying was as audible to her as though it had been addressed to herself.

Sir George, possibly a little less on his guard than he might have been at an earlier period of the night, was still, in his own eyes, a miracle of caution.

"No need to name names," said he; "you know whom I mean. And what I say is" (he must have turned his head round at this point, for he seemed to be speaking the next words into Charlotte's very ear), "what I say is this: If she's *on*, I'm *off*! Yes, I am. I've thought it over, and I won't be mixed up with that girl for any consideration. What?"

An inarticulate response, whose tenor might be surmised, for the speaker resumed:—

"Well, of course I didn't. Never said I did, but any-

way I do now. You know what you said of her yourself; and though I didn't agree with you then——"

Again a murmured reply, apparently of the same nature, for again Sir George in his broader tones responded:—

"That's all very well, but you would do the same in my shoes. And I'm not engaged yet, nor will be, if she brings hers off, which it looks as if she would do now——"

"Lady Lawley's carriage stops the way. Mrs. Sunning's carriage coming up"—from without.

"There, Charlotte; there is ours!" cried Charlotte's mother at the same moment.

"Only 'coming up'; no hurry," said Charlotte, tranquilly. "Oh, these tiresome green things," and she turned to disentangle a frond from her skirt. As she did so she looked swiftly through the screen.

What she saw made her start, and almost, but not quite, forced an exclamation from her lips; for in Tregillis' companion and confidant she recognised——

"Now, my dear, now!" In another minute the two were driving from the door.

"Did you see who was sitting behind you, almost at your elbow?" said Mrs. Sunning, laughing, as the carriage door shut. "I did not tell you, but I heard upstairs that Lord Tarporley was below, and I wanted to prepare you first."

"For Tarpy? In Heaven's name why should I need to be prepared for *him*?"

"We thought he was at the ends of the earth, you know."

"So we did, but people have been known to come back even from the ends of the earth. So Tarpy has reappeared?"

"But stop a moment, it was something more than

that I heard. Much more interesting, though of no consequence to us *now*. You will commend my prudence when you hear."

"Very likely; but when I tell you that I also saw Tarpy through the screen, though I own not till the last moment——"

"Did you really, Charlotte? I must say I should not have supposed it;" the speaker looked frank approbation; "if I had felt I could trust you—but I was afraid you would fly at him——"

"Nonsense!"

"You were always such friends, and you have complained that you missed Lord Tarporley. I have told several people you did—for drives and dinners, you know. So I said to myself, I will just prepare Charlotte."

"For what?"

"For his engagement. Colonel Blake told me of it. Lord Tarporley announced it at his club this afternoon. It is to some girl he met on his travels, and he has cut them short in order to hurry home and get things ready for the marriage. I looked round when we came downstairs; but as I saw him nowhere, I said to myself it could wait."

"So it could," Charlotte yawned and stepped out, for the carriage drew up with the last words. "What a blessing to have such a short way to go to-night," she murmured. "This has been rather a terrific evening. Good-night; let's talk it over to-morrow." Then, as her mother's voice began again, she waved her hand imperiously, "I really can't say another word now; and oh, how I wish I could drop into bed as I am!" wearily beginning the long ascent.

"I am sorry you are so tired, Charlotte. We should have come away before."

“But she did not seem in the least tired till after I said that about Lord Tarporley,” pondered Mrs. Sunning. “Surely she is not—and she always told me it was no use thinking of him. At any rate,” on further reflection, “I am glad I *did* prepare her. If there ever were any feeling, it might have shown itself, for the poor dear does not like, and never did like, losing any of her admirers.”

Presently a cunning light stole into the widow's eyes. “What if this should prove the very thing needed to bring the Rotherham affair to a point?” she cried in triumph.

Let us ascend to Charlotte overhead. She has been disrobed by Kitchin, who has borne off the shining ball-dress and disappeared, nothing else being required of her—and now the room is empty, and a white figure has thrown itself upon the bed, with eyes burning and blood boiling within.

“So it was of *me* you spoke, you two? I was ‘that girl’ with whom the high and mighty George Tregillis would not be ‘mixed up for any consideration!’ I might have known; but I couldn’t think it—I *couldn’t*. The mean, revengeful creature. That was why he gave Henny’s party the slip; and now that I think of it, he was not at the Rotherhams the two last times I was there. The lout has taken it into his head that—but Tarpy? Tarpy I *do* care about. And Tarpy had ‘said something’. ‘You know what you said of her yourself,’ that vile George reminded him; and there was I actually pitying the poor thing upon whom they were both so down!”

A pause.

“When could Tarpy have said it?” pursued Charlotte, slowly rising and beginning to take down her hair—a picture she looked with her bare, beautiful arms up-

stretched—"it could not have been lately; he left England in October, and George spoke as if it were an old thing. Not a new one, at all events. 'You know what you said of her yourself.' What *did* Tarpy say? He used to like me; he by way of adored me—that is, we were the best of friends, and he never looked at another girl when I was by. Could it have been he who set George Tregillis on to spy upon me at The Island Cottage? Can Gerry Brown have been chattering to them both? Or—or——"

Everything was horrible, abominable, unjust, untrue. They were all lying and slandering. She felt herself to be the most ill-used, defenceless being on the face of the earth; and as for meeting the detestable creatures next day—no, that very day it was—how should she do it? Tears, real tears, stood in her eyes.

But by noon on the following day the spirit had come back to her, and she was tired of her bed. Tired, too, of vexing thoughts, and craving for some new excitement to dissipate them. Rotherham must come to a point—that alone could save the situation—and she had absolutely no appointment with Rotherham that day! She elected to stay at home, and see if he would seek her out there.

"What are you doing to-night?" inquired Mrs. Sunning. "Your aunt——"

"For heaven's sake save me from her!"

"Olivia Jephson——"

"Olivia Jephson is a little devil."

"My dear Charlotte! Really you must not say such things. I daresay you are provoked—but still!"

"Pray what has Olivia done?" demanded the speaker, presently. "I saw that you and she avoided each other last night, and she would not even come near me; but I thought it was because of that big, black man she had

got with her ; an odious looking creature, and they were together the whole evening ; but he—you had nothing to do with him ? ”

“ No more than if he were a nigger—as I daresay he is, though she calls him a count.”

“ But I am sure there was something ? ”—persistently.

“ Very much something. Oh, I don’t mind telling you. She found me sitting with Mr. Rotherham at the Dimsdales’, and she knew quite well I was keeping the ball dark—of course there is no need to thrust down his throat all I do, he is easily scared——”

“ Yes, yes ; I understand. You are quite right.”

“ So Olivia must needs rush at me, and plant herself in front, and begin at the pitch of her voice about ‘ the Mitchams,’ ‘ the Mitchams ! ’—and she doesn’t even know them, she only got invited through other people—those Delacross people she is always catering for. They have to pay her back. Then she screamed at me, ‘ Would I go with her ? ’ I saw myself going with her ! The whole thing provoked me to such an extent that I lost my head and did badly myself. And that was what she meant me to do—what she came out on the balcony on purpose for : to try to damage me with Drax Rotherham. Mother, they are all against me,” exclaimed Charlotte, passionately. “ What have I done to make so many enemies ? I am not ill-natured and malevolent like Olivia ; I am not cruel, and spiteful, and interfering—that is,” as memory and conscience suddenly and simultaneously lifted a reproach-finger, “ I don’t pretend to be immaculate, but I never did any one a bad turn for *no* reason. Olivia has *no* reason for being so horrid to me about this. And—others have none either. Why should they ?——” she bit her lip and stopped short.

“ They ? Who, Charlotte ? ”

"Everybody," vaguely. "I don't suppose there is any one I know, except you and the Dimsdales, who really wants me to be happy, and thinks I am good enough for this paragon."

"They are jealous of you, dear."

"Jealous? How can men be jealous? It is the men as well as the women. Well, I'll tell you," impatiently; "you seem to think I don't know what I'm talking about, but I don't go about blind and deaf. I could name three men at this present moment, no one of whom wants me for himself, yet who, for no reason whatever that I can make out, would like to prevent this marriage."

"I cannot think of one, Charlotte. It must be fancy. You are rather low to-day, my poor child, and you are so sensitive——"

"I am not particularly sensitive. I should rather say I can stand a good deal; but I do like to have my friends true to me"—her voice shook a little.

"Who does not? But *your* friends—I really—I feel sure there must be some mistake. You are so rich in friends—never girl had more—you would say so yourself at another time."

Charlotte was silent.

"Do tell me, dear. You might tell me. Am I not your mother, and you know that *I* at least——"

"Yes, yes; I know. Well then, I'll tell you," reluctantly. "First of all there is Sebastian Alban——"

"I can understand *him*; and I always did wish you would go to his church oftener. But you have gone quite often of late. He might, he ought to have noticed that. And when you don't go, I do."

"It does not take him in. Your sort of religion doesn't go down with those who have the real thing, and Sebastian—well, I don't blame him, though I think he might give me a chance. But what business have Tarpy

and George Tregillis to set themselves up above me? They are the friends I mean. Oh, I daresay you are astonished, but it's true. How do I know it? I do know it; that's enough. It makes me hate them all."

"Well, well," murmured Mrs. Sunning, soothingly. "After all, what does it matter, Charlotte? You have been a little wild and foolish—I was always afraid people thought you so; you have such spirits and they carry you away—but no one can say any real harm of you; and now that you see this for yourself——"

"But I don't! I don't see it!"

"Your being willing to marry Mr. Rotherham is a proof of it. He is a most superior man; far, far above Lord Tarporley or any of your other admirers—Mr. Alban's particular friend," triumphantly. "A marriage with him would steady you, and give you a position which would be quite unassailable. I daresay it is the knowledge of this which embitters the others; they feel you would be lost to them——"

"Why should I be? I shouldn't marry to shut myself up."

"You could show this afterwards, but they would not believe it now. Oh, I have no doubt, not the slightest, that it is this they are afraid of," pursued the diplomat, cheerfully perceiving daylight. "Men are so jealous, my dear. Talk of us women, we are nothing to them—nothing, nothing, nothing!—and you have always managed so well to keep all amused without their clashing with each other——"

"Do you think it is that?"

"I am positive it is. You saw how that hot-headed Sir George Tregillis glared at poor, inoffensive Gerry Brown that day in the boat? As if he could have murdered the poor boy!"

"*You* could;" a gleam of returning good humour.

"Gerry has never got over your face at him that day, and he is one of my few faithful ones," clouding again.

"As for Lord Tarporley," continued Mrs. Sunning, hastily, "it is easy to see why he is vexed—if it be true, as you say, that he is vexed. He hung about you for years, keeping others off; then he flies off no one knows where; and finally dashes back into the midst of us all, shouting out that he is engaged. Colonel Blake says he made the announcement with a tremendous flourish. He meant that we—and you in particular—should be wild with curiosity and envy. He finds you on the brink of a marriage——"

"I wish they weren't all talking about it. It makes me feel that I must go on with it."

("For which Heaven be thanked!" mentally ejaculated the widow.) "And naturally his news falls a little flat," proceeded she, glibly. "In our set you are a much more interesting and popular personage than he—I mean in your and Lord Tarporley's set, for I know you don't admit me to it; mothers are quite out of date, of course. And there is another thing besides," continued the speaker, "which naturally would be a little mortifying. Lord Tarporley's girl is a mere nobody, whilst you are carrying off one of the best matches, if not *the* match of the season."

"I wish I knew," muttered Charlotte, thoughtfully. "Why should Mr. Rotherham be thought such a great match?" she suddenly looked up. "There are men as rich as he, with titles to boot——"

"And *always* something against them," interposed Mrs. Sunning, with solemn emphasis. "No one knows better than you, Charlotte, how surely, as any young man gets to be known as desirable and eligible, one hears that he has, say, an hereditary disease which may break out at any moment—or an incurable passion for

betting and gambling which will strip him of every penny in a few years' time—or that he is completely at his father's mercy, with whom he is on the worst possible terms—or other things too shocking to mention. I say nothing about appearance, though I might add that a wealthy young man is invariably ugly——”

“Oh, come, mother”—but Charlotte smiled and listened.

“He is,” persisted her mother. “When I was a girl, my parents looked out for me the son of a neighbour, a sort of Croesus in our village; and when I objected to his lumpy, freckled face, and the way his shoulders met over his head, they said you never expected to get both money and looks.”

“So you went for the looks, for which accept, though late in the day, my humble thanks, dear mum;” a complacent glance at the mirror.

“Your father's face and figure were perfection; I cannot think how Henrietta is so plain.”

“I don't call her plain. However, let us return to ourselves. You think Drax and I would make a second edition of you and father?”

“My dear, it would not be only that. Think of his character——”

“Ha, ha, ha!” laughed Charlotte. Her mother saw what she had said.

She had, however, succeeded in her object, and could afford to be pettish and explanatory, and full of the virtues of the dear departed—wiling and beguiling till the gloom upon her daughter's brow gradually gave way to a gentle pensiveness, conveniently attributable to fatigue when by-and-bye visitors came in, and the conversation was at an end.

“I wonder now what I should do, or if there is anything I *can* do?” quoth Charlotte, to herself, when once

more alone. "Seven o'clock; no more will come now," for there had been a constant stream since the first arrivals. "It is too late to go out, and there is nothing to go for. I shan't go anywhere this evening either. I don't want to go. Mother can take Kitty or a Benhan girl to the theatre; it would be a pity to waste the tickets, but I should hate it. I'm not in the humour for dressing, or anything. Drax *might* have come——" but at that moment a note from Drax was put into her hand.

She started up, her eyes glistening, but the brevity of its contents precluded her first idea. Still she read with rapid interest the few lines: "I had hoped to call this afternoon, but we are in great trouble. My father had a paralytic seizure a few hours ago, and is still unconscious. Forgive me for hoping you would be the first to sympathise with us."

In a few minutes Charlotte was walking towards the Rotherhams' house. She had told no one she was going.

And she would hardly stop to tell herself, or to consider whether the impulse which hurried her on her way were one to be acted on or not. She had a strange longing to go; to see the kind, faithful, believing eyes which never mocked her nor triumphed over her; to hear the voice whose tender accents never jeered nor jibed; to hold the hand which never covertly struck—and if this were love, let it be love.

He had 'hoped for her sympathy'—had he hoped for her presence? With her heart beating she rang the bell.

No visitors admitted.

"Oh!" said Miss Sunning, hesitating. "I—I have come to inquire," she added, after a moment. "But of course——" and she felt for her card-case, but had forgotten it.

She was turning away—and turned to meet Rotherham face to face. He had been writing a telegram in a post-office close by, afraid of any delay in its despatch as it was an important one, and was hurrying back to his own house when—but we can imagine his feelings on beholding her who was seldom out of his thoughts, and beholding her, too, all agitation, confusion, fearfulness. He also said to himself: “If this be love, let it be love”.

A parent is always a parent, but we know that scarcely any other tie than that of blood existed between Mr. Rotherham, senior, and his children. He was formerly a recluse, latterly an invalid; and in neither capacity did he expect or desire more of them than a species of non-existence. Such affection as he had to bestow had been reserved for the two amiable women who had severally been won by his fine appearance and scholarly reputation; he had also maintained friendly relations with a few Oxford chums of his youth (to one of whom, it will be remembered, was due the present prosperity of the family); but he was secretly disappointed in his eldest son, and took for granted the inferiority of the rest.

As a matter of fact, had he cared to inquire, he might have found that the young lads were already showing signs of intellectual promise—but this is irrelevant to our story, and we have only mentioned the above as an apology for the throbbing of Drax Rotherham’s pulses at a moment when one thought might have been expected to exclude every other.

He had been told that his father would probably pass away within the next twenty-four hours; his sisters were weeping and watching in the sickroom; an awe-stricken silence pervaded the mansion, every one speaking in subdued tones befitting the occasion; and yet the sight of Charlotte, and still more the look upon her face, made all go down before it.

She had come to him! Come, too, on the wings of the wind! Sorrow and sympathy and self-abandonment were in her eyes, in the mute clasp of her hand—love, surely love revealed itself in the way that hand was left in his own? He gently led her within.

The servants fell back as the door shut, and the two, still almost in silence, their very footsteps hushed, ascended to the empty drawing-room.

"Dear," said Drax, softly, "I must speak now—at last."

And as he spoke all fear vanished from his heart. He could not plead that he did not know what he was saying, for his senses had never been clearer, his faculties more acute; but all seemed natural, inevitable. He told her the truth, heedless of the form it took. She was the one being in the world for him; he had never known love until he knew her; once he had been mistrustful of her feelings and startled at his own presumption, but now he would no longer hesitate, for why should he? Was she not here? Had she not, Heaven bless her for the great, the wonderful goodness of it! hastened to be with him?

"Yes, yes, indeed," murmured she. "I did—I did feel that I could not keep away. But was I wrong, was I too bold?——" and she hid her face in her hands.

And then his arms were round her, and his lips upon her cheek.

"Say you are mine," he whispered. . . .

Half-an-hour later Drax gently tapped at the sick-room door, and beckoned to those within. A sister rose, and he looked towards the other.

"Come, both of you."

They came, surprised and glancing at him sideways; it was a relief to be withdrawn for a space from their dreary watch, when nothing could be done, and only the

ticking of the clock broke the hushed monotony of the death chamber—but Drax thought they ought to be there, and only released himself from the same obligation in order to attend to some necessary business. The boys had to be summoned, his business partners informed, and—but this he did not think it needful to add—a note despatched.

What seemed a very long time had certainly elapsed since he left to discharge these various duties, and his tap at the door was gladly heard; but when he did not enter, and merely informed the nurse in attendance that some of the family would shortly return, while motioning them outside, they experienced, as we say, a faint sense of wonder and expectation, not unwelcome.

“Who is it? What is it?” they murmured, simultaneously.

“Come and see,” he replied.

But he saw that they were shrinking and faltering, and, with the new knowledge that had come to him of other feelings, recalled that possibly, for Adeline at least, a disappointment might be in store.

Nothing had been seen of Tregillis for the past week, and previous to that his visits had been unsatisfactory; Drax himself alone suspecting why. He felt sorry, but angry—and indignation prevented regret for his sister’s loss. It was inconceivable to him that a man worth anything should breathe a syllable against a woman once beloved, even if rejected by her; and if such a man were capable of carrying his resentment to the extent indicated by Sir George’s behaviour, the sooner he took himself off the better.

Poor Addy, however, must not have her hopes raised.

“Stop a moment,” said he, with his hand on the great door-knob, for by this time they had reached the door of the room wherein Charlotte awaited them. “Tell

me, can't either of you guess who is in there? Some one very dear to me," significantly. "Some one who has flown to us in our sorrow"—(quite simply and sincerely he called it 'sorrow,' but his own eyes were brimming with joy)—"and who has now the right to be with us, and feel with us, and share our——"

They understood.

"Dear, dear Drax!" . . .

"Now come in," he said.

It was, perhaps, a momentary shock to find themselves the next minute in the presence of the fashionable beauty, as usual radiant and sparkling with colour and light—had she thought of it, Charlotte would have toned herself down, but we know she came in haste—while Addy and Evie in their morning frocks, were even a little less trim than usual, owing to late rising consequent on the evening's dissipation, and further to the subsequent *bouleversement* of everything and the isolation of the house—but the next moment made its own and most ample amends.

Happiness on some natures has a wonderful effect, and Charlotte had never been so near real happiness in her life as during the past hour, culminating possibly in the brief solitude wherein she was calm to think about it.

She had won the day—her bosom swelled with exultation—but there was also a softer and purer emotion—she had won the man.

He had embraced her reverently, yet passionately; his utterances had been unexaggerated, yet fervent and impetuous. She would not have been ashamed for any one to hear him—that, oddly enough, was a rising thought. Charlotte, having a turn for ridicule, could bear less than others to be ridiculous; and with all her self-love, high-flown impressions and raptures on the

part of a swain would have evoked a sense of unpleasant mirth. "He never made a fool of himself," she would say to others—"or a fool of *me*," to herself.

But Drax Rotherham had raised her in her own eyes. She would not have changed in any single respect what he said or did throughout the interview; she would not have seen him more impassioned, less impassioned, more outspoken, more reticent; he was just right, and she the luckiest girl in the world.

She drew in the balmy atmosphere of the great, sun-warmed drawing-room, and looked about her. It was rather a bare room, despite handsome pieces of solid furniture—it lacked flowers and pretty things—she would soon change that. But how beautiful, how reposeful it felt! The very formality of its chairs and tables, all precisely distributed by careful housemaids, had a tranquillising effect. The *débris* of the tea-table was such a spot in such a room! In Charlotte's room it occupied the whole space there was.

"And the old man's dying, too!" whispered she to herself; and whereas a few hours before she had declared the hand of Fate heavy upon her, she now esteemed it a caress.

The dear girls!

"I have never had sisters of my own," said Charlotte, with a melting tenderness in her beautiful eyes. "I hope these little sisters will love me."

They assured her they would. They looked from her to Drax, and from Drax to her, with shy delight and heart-felt sympathy. Evie wondered within her own heart what it felt like. Addie fancied she knew, and breathed a sigh. Poor child!

But their brother had been their idol for so long that what was great to him was more than great to them, and he and Charlotte beings of another sphere at such a

crisis; wherefore Addy would not let her thoughts stray elsewhere.

And Miss Sunning was so sweet, so subdued and gentle, seemed to understand so exactly how they all felt, and that nothing but their father's state could be thought of for the present—even appearing, in a way, to blame herself for intruding on their grief and showing a want of delicacy by her haste!

"I just precipitated myself upon you—I couldn't help it," said she.

Drax sat upon the elbow of the sofa, and smiled down upon her at the words. The great, roomy sofa enclosed the other three, and each little sister's hand held one of Charlotte's. ("I wonder if Mr. Alban would think this 'a pleasant picture'?" mentally exclaimed she.) But she did not say it ironically.

CHAPTER XV.

"NOW, CHARLOTTE!"

WHEN she left, the whole party accompanied Charlotte downstairs.

She liked this sort of following. Possibly her lover did not, and may have hoped for something better, but he could not summarily order his sisters off the field, and, short of plain speaking, nothing would detach them from Charlotte's side.

Already they were fascinated; watching all she did, treasuring up every word she spoke, and ready to burst forth the moment she had gone.

"No, you must not come with me," said she to Drax, who was preparing to do so. "No, I say, no; I forbid it." Then in a lower aside: "It would not do, don't you see? We should be sure to meet people, and as nothing is to be said just yet——" He saw and submitted.

But under any circumstances Charlotte would have preferred to be alone. All had happened so quickly and unexpectedly that she was still in a tumult of varied emotions, and had much to think over before she could settle with herself how she felt, and realise her new position. Memory and imagination could have no play, with the present demanding her full attention as it had done during the past hour, and she longed to lose herself in thought, undisturbed.

"It is late," said Drax. "Are you going to walk?"

"Oh, let us send you——" began Adeline, eagerly. But Charlotte waved aside all propositions.

"My mother will have finished dinner already," she said, gaily. "She has to dine early, as we had tickets for 'The Runaway Girl,' but I was not going; I was not in the mood for the theatre; and Kitty Dimsdale was only too glad to be taken. I was 'The Runaway Girl' myself to-night," she added, laughing.

"And you would really prefer to go alone? Piccadilly isn't——" hesitated Drax.

Charlotte, however, promised that she would only just cross Piccadilly, and seeing a little lurking anxiety still depicted on her lover's brow, he was allowed to take her as far as the crossing, and there dismissed.

"Now, go back, please. It is not nine o'clock yet, and I am accustomed to going about by myself. Go home, and get your dinner, sir;" and the pretty airs of a tyrant, which had an inexpressible charm from such lips at such a moment, left him no choice but obedience.

"He must understand *that* from the first," said Charlotte, to herself. "I can't have him, or any one, always at my heels. And though it is flattering to be so precious, cotton wool becomes stifling when one is wrapped in it. Now, let me think." And she exchanged her rapid, assured step for one more lingering.

It was a delightful evening; a shower of summer rain had cooled the air, the pavements glistened, and flowers on balconies and window-sills dripped refreshingly.

One bank of mignonette sent forth a fragrance so exquisite that Charlotte paused to inhale it. She was fond of flowers; fond of all sweet, sensuous things; sometimes she would even deny herself in other respects in order to purchase a bountiful supply, at whose expense her mother demurred. Charlotte alleged that she could not live without them.

There were a good many things she could not live without. Luxury was not luxury, but necessity with her. And, she argued, why had she been born with tastes that were not to be gratified?

Well, now she could both gratify and extend them; nothing need be beyond her reach; and the more she pondered over her future, the better she was satisfied with its outlook. Drax was certainly a dear fellow, and what luck for her that she had been able to fix her affections on a dear fellow, considering that she might have had to do so on some one altogether different.

She was really quite fond of him, and would be very good to him.

Of course, being so devoted to her, he would speedily learn all her little ways, and anticipate her wishes even before she knew them herself. At first he might be a trifle dense, but love is a marvellous teacher, and she had already seen wonderful results in less promising quarters. Men who did not care for her a tenth part as Drax Rotherham did had divined her whims and gratified them with astonishing celerity. She could count on a treasure of a husband.

And it had all come about so suddenly, so unexpectedly! That very afternoon she had been the lowest of the low, fretting beneath the prolonged tension, tantalised as no poor girl was ever before tantalised by a wavering, hovering wooer, whose mind every one seemed to know better than he did himself (Charlotte always established her grievances, as she did whatsoever pertained to her, upon a pinnacle), and now there was no greater change in the clear sky above, which had forgotten its murkiness of a few hours before, than in her present buoyant spirits as contrasted with their former gloom.

She hummed a tune beneath her breath and trod to

it. A barrel-organ was trilling roulades of the same air—she stopped and gave the monkey-man a sixpence. As a rule she never gave in the streets.

Further on a child was crying, and Charlotte's hand was in her pocket again; but the child was aggressive, and got nothing.

"Noisy little wretch!" muttered the young lady instead. She had a fastidious dislike to vulgar clamour.

The frown vanished however, and the sweet influences of the hour regained their sway.

"No, thank you, I have some already;" a flower-seller who thrust forward her wares hoping for a purchaser, was met by a gentle shake of the head, and a finger pointed to a single large white 'Niphotos' rose which drooped in Charlotte's bosom—the first offering of her lover. She looked at it kindly as she spoke.

Oh, what a good place the world was, and how good and graceful and far uplifted above the common herd she felt! All had come right, despite the efforts of her persecutors, and the misgivings of her own heart.

And now she was glad that she had not married earlier, before she had won her maiden laurels, and slain her thousands legitimately.

As a wife she would not flirt—much. Certainly she would never get herself into hot water, and be foolish, as Olivia Jephson was. "I am not sure that I shall flirt at all," she went so far as to say. "One can enjoy oneself very much without."

She would have her coach at Ascot, her house-boat at Henley, her luncheon-table at Lord's.

Hurlingham, of course. Drax could become a member at once—and they would give nice little Sunday dinners—ah, but—would there be any difficulty about Sunday dinners? Sebastian Alban thought them wicked; but

Alban's would be an outside influence, and an outside influence was always manageable.

"And I really should not be ill to please; I should give up some things; anything that the poor fellow took very much to heart," further cogitated she. "I daresay he wouldn't like roulette parties—we should have to see about them. Perhaps he might be left a little in the dark; I could tell my friends he had early prejudices, and we needn't put more than sixpences on the table. They might laugh, but they would have to do as I told them. And Tarp is going to marry a pious, domestic young woman who will clip his wings too, so we shall be in the same boat. Tarp won't like it. Had he and I—but we have each done better for ourselves, or at least I have. . . . I long to give it out. Twenty-four hours the doctor said. Of course, we can ante-date the engagement which had 'just taken place'" (rapidly conning over a formula), "and if ever a considerate old gentleman did the right thing at the right time, it is Drax's dear papa now."

When Charlotte came to her own door, she stood still on the step. She did not want to go in; she did not care for dinner; excitement had taken away all appetite; and the house would be stuffy and dismal.

Even from the outside it wore a subdued look. The servants were probably not expecting her; and should she ring the bell, it would be to find there was only an underling in the kitchen, who would be terrified by the most ordinary demand. She elected to put off her return, and stroll towards the Park.

Close by, there was a large dinner-party going on, and rosy lamps were lit above and around the gorgeously decorated table, while butlers and footmen bustled hither and thither. Charlotte, after a glance through the open windows, crossed over to be out of the way of a carriage

which stopped in front of the awning over the doorstep, and smiled to herself. "The Mitchams. Recovered from their ball, and beginning to-night's work at a ducal dinner-party. They will go on to Julia Dalrymple's concert, and perhaps look in at little Susie Grote's first attempt. Poor little Susie! She won't make anything of it. *I* ought to have been there. . . ."

She felt quite outside and beyond it all, and was conscious of a keen pleasure in her freedom and obscurity. It was as if she had veritably 'run away,' as she said. Every one would be asking after her at little Mrs. Grote's house-warming—(she had evaded the concert and not been asked to the dinner-party, and, truth to tell, it was the latter omission which had caused a secret disgust with the evening's programme, resulting in a vaunted preference for the theatre)—and no one would guess what she was about instead.

Something exquisitely important and engrossing. Something which would burst on her detractors like a bomb-shell—not the less so because it was expected. People can expect things in such a way as to be confounded by their taking place.

Others beside Olivia Jephson had remarked on the non-appearance of Drax Rotherham at the Mitchams' ball, and Charlotte knew that whispers were flying. His father's seizure would put that straight—it could be antedated like the engagement, if necessary—and now that she thought of it, she found something to enjoy in the very secrecy, and mystery, and diplomacy in which her next few days must be enveloped.

Drax might come to her openly—but she would have to go to his house by stealth. Go she would; she loved the great, calm mansion and the thought of reigning there; also it would be a proper attention; and again the sisters hung upon her lips. Oh, she would go and

fascinate, securely hidden within those hushed portals, safe from all her so-called friends.

Drax, too; she sometimes—sometimes almost felt about him as she did on the river evenings. Engaged couples had always plenty to talk about; she was not afraid of *tête-à-têtes*.

All this would be quite as good, in its way, as flying round with the news. It would be peaceful, soothing, tranquillising—with the great vista in front.

Every little thing would be tinged by hues from that prospective, and even the dread neighbourhood of death could be borne when wedding-bells were heard chiming in the distance.

“I really think I am very nice about it all.”

To be able to applaud herself was the crowning pleasure of the evening. Charlotte disliked to feel angry and ill-humoured, and never had the slightest illusion when her motives for action would not bear the light; wherefore it diffused a glow through her veins to feel so kindly, and tolerant, and benevolent. A smile played upon her lips as she strolled hither and thither, and it was still there when, on turning out of the Park, she perceived a few paces in front a familiar figure in the act of hailing a hansom. Mr. Alban did not see her, but giving the direction to the driver, jumped inside, and was closing the door when a merry face peeped round the corner, and nodded to him.

“Good-night, Sebastian.”

So arch and good-humoured was the sally, so bright the eyes which met his astonished glance, that in his confusion he cried aloud “Charlotte!” and one of the doors flew open again.

Charlotte? It might have been the Charlotte of his boyish dreams—it could not be the Charlotte of his mature condemnation. She looked sixteen—sweet, soft,

rosy sixteen. And what a voice—it trilled as pure and clear as that of a rising lark.

He sprang forward, but the speaker simultaneously stepped backwards.

Many a day afterwards he thought of her as she stood there in the pleasant evening light, laughing at him—laughing and shaking her head with a pretty mocking gesture, like that of a frolicsome child—many a time he seemed to hear that “Good-night, Sebastian!” with its arch, provocative, ringing note.

Had the meeting only taken place a few minutes sooner! He was not pressed for time, not very much pressed, and what he had to do could have been postponed and the opportunity embraced, if he had but been walking as she was. She was evidently disengaged and in a cheerful, natural frame of mind; he would have liked to talk to her when thus.

Perhaps he might have mentioned Rotherham; perhaps not. On the whole, it might have been better not; but at any rate, he could have enjoyed a walk with Charlotte. He looked not a little blank as his hansom turned away, and the white figure beneath the trees was lost to sight.

“Good-night, Sebastian!” For some inexplicable reason Sebastian’s bachelor quarters, usually comfortable enough, and presided over by an orderly landlady who revered his books and papers, felt unaccountably lonely and desolate that evening. He had had a hard day’s work, and the clock struck eleven ere he threw himself into a chair, weary but indisposed for sleep. What a strange and complicated affair life was! That day he had seen many sides of it; he had set on foot a scheme which required the co-operation of different classes of men, and some had shown curious idiosyncrasies. A few had pleased and touched him—he had

not expected to evoke so much that was good and true from unpromising exteriors—others again had been disappointing.

New doors also had opened; he perceived how the usefulness of the work might be extended; various sidelights were shed on it. Should he, while yet impressions were strong, and accumulated facts clear in his mind, address himself to despatching in writing some further appeals? They could wait, but the next day might not find him so clear-headed, hopeful, and convincing. He was not always so sanguine.

Yet again this optimistic mood, oddly contrasting with the dull, silent chamber, and the frugal refreshment of its solitary tray—a few biscuits and a glass of wine, and no cheerful companion to share them—what had brought it about?

“I was not so light-hearted when I met Charlotte,” said he. The biscuits and wine remained untouched.

“Have I done Charlotte injustice?” mused Alban, dreamily lying back in his chair. “Is she not the hard, crafty, mercenary woman I think her? She has deteriorated, of course. No one can be with her and be blind to that. But she may be passing through a phase of terrible temptation to which her nature is acutely alive, and while to outward appearance she yields, who can tell that there is not a struggle, fitful perhaps, but still a struggle, going on within. A creature so divinely gifted must have infinitely more to contend with than the majority of her sex; and such as she, if in the end they rise, rise high. But——” suddenly he rose and paced the room, twice turned, and stood still, with his head sunk upon his breast—what he was saying in his heart was: “But if they fall—what if they fall?” A long, long time later he was still mechanically repeating “What if they fall?” . . .

When Charlotte's mother heard what had happened, she could scarce believe the wondrous tale. Charlotte was her dear, dear, dearest daughter; no one ever was more fortunate, or so well deserved good fortune. Mr. Rotherham was——

"Yes, yes; we know all that," said Charlotte, with a laugh.

"My love, I won't bore you; we are neither of us given to rhapsody, and I should not have been so foolish only that yesterday——"

"Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof," said Charlotte, who could always quote, "and better is poor dear old man Rotherham's end than any number of beginnings. Think of it, I have never even seen him! They can't expect me to do more than look a little serious and sentimental. He has shut himself up all his life, Drax says, and no one pretends to violent affliction now—but of course he is their father and—what about your going to do the civil? They will expect it, I fancy."

Mrs. Sunning was only too ready; when and how should she go, what should she say? She would not—slight alarm here visible—be taken to the sick room?

"Oh dear, no," laughed Charlotte.

"*Anything* else, my dear? I will talk about it; I have no objection whatever to that. And if they like to show me his photograph——"

"You are too funny, mum. This upset has made you quite as absurd as other people, and you are pretty sane as a rule. It *is* unHINGING to the nerves, I allow. Now try and pull yourself together."

"But what did I say, Charlotte? About the photograph? Should I not ask to see it? I thought I might look at it, you know; and make some remarks about its being a fine face——"

"By all means—carefully prepared beforehand. But take care you don't get landed as you did with the Blake sister"—for Mrs. Sunning had seen such an extraordinary resemblance between her dear colonel and a lady he had never set eyes on in his life, that she could not be mistaken in introducing herself to Lady Angela Hardcastle as a very old and intimate friend. Lady Angela had glared at the fawning, tuft-hunting little woman, and it did not mend matters when some one officiously pointed out the real Mary Blake, who was as stout again and goggle-eyed. Charlotte had enjoyed the scene vastly.

"It would not do to be struck by some other person's 'fine face,'" cried she now; "make sure of your man before you let loose your raptures. And look here, mum, those girls are very—very——" she hesitated.

"Unsophisticated," suggested Mrs. Sunning.

"Don't shock them," said Charlotte, earnestly. "They may like you—they do like me—it would be better for us all if we could keep up the illusion. Try to remember that they are not even like ordinary girls just out of the schoolroom, and I have seen *them* look at each other when you forgot they were there."

"I am sure," the widow reddened, "you give your tongue far more licence than I ever give mine, Charlotte."

"I am more careful in what company I give it. We must both be careful before the Rotherham girls. That is all I meant to say."

She was quite pleased with her mother during the visit; no one could have done better, she said afterwards. The ladies went together decorously engulfed in a very small brougham, whose unpretentiousness had been made a great point of by Mrs. Sunning, when send-

ing round to the livery stables—and she would fain have had both windows up, but Charlotte rebelled.

"I don't see why we shouldn't have gone in a hansom if you thought the vic. too blatant," said she.

"My dear, a hansom? Faces are more seen in a hansom than in any other kind of carriage."

"But who was to know where the faces were going?"

She yielded the point however, being indifferent; and in the brougham they went, guiltily and gleefully shrinking into themselves when they passed an acquaintance, yet all on the alert for the next; cowering down when Olivia Jephson drove by, yet peeping after her through the little back window. In short they behaved like two children, and one was as giddy as the other.

The blinds of the Rotherhams' house were still up, and they were informed that no change had taken place in the patient's condition. They were, however, invited to enter.

And Mrs. Sunning's deportment in the house of mourning was a study for the gods. Albeit the carpets were of the thickest pile, she stepped delicately, and snatched at her dress, which was heard swishing against the banisters as she turned an angle of the staircase. When asked for her name outside the dining-room door, she breathed it so softly that it would have been useless but that the butler was a man of logical instincts, and mentally placed Charlotte as a context. Her slow approach up the room, the pressure of her hand, the mingling of joy and sorrow upon her countenance, the sympathy, and significance, and seriousness of her opening address—her demeanour in short, from head to foot, was a thing to see and to remember.

Addy and Evie, who had been summoned from the bedside of their dying parent to face the ordeal, and who were palpitating not a little beneath its prospective

terrors, found Mrs. Sunning so easy to get on with that she soon had them talking away quite unrestrainedly.

"I am not a very formidable person," murmured she, holding a hand of each; and then she pressed the hands and smiled and directed their eyes with her own towards the other end of the room.

"*They* don't want us, and *we* don't want them," she whispered.

Addy and Evie felt quite at home with Mrs. Sunning, and they had no jealousy of Charlotte, nor of the change her presence wrought upon the brother who had hitherto been all their own. Rather they delighted in noting every little effort put forth for her attention, every transparent lover-like *ruse* for drawing her apart. Drax was generally sociable and had no wandering proclivities, but now he could not rest, starting up when Charlotte moved, fetching things for her to see, following her every glance with his eyes.

Under present circumstances the call could not be a prolonged one, nor could much be said of future meetings and arrangements, but all was understood, and the ladies escorted back to their brougham by their host, who was graciously accorded permission to appear in Charles Street later on.

"Shan't I be in the way?" he said, humbly. "Of course I know you must keep your engagements——"

"Just a few of them; the ball at the French Embassy——" but Mrs. Sunning, who had leaned eagerly forward, enchanted with his penetration, felt a warning hand upon her knee.

"I might *have* to go," said Charlotte, with a sweet reluctance. "There are one or two things I cannot well evade, but I certainly shall not sacrifice myself for my friends more than is absolutely necessary. Can you come this evening, say about nine?"

"If I may." He looked delighted. "That is just when I should like best to come, as I thought perhaps I ought to take the boys somewhere this afternoon. To be out of the way, you know. They can't be expected to——"

"No, no," murmured Mrs. Sunning.

"And as there is no immediate expectation of a change, it would be cruel to keep them hanging about the house from hour to hour."

"You are so thoughtful, so considerate. You will just take them for a little turn near at hand?" suggested she, having her own reasons for desiring to know its limits. Charlotte had an engagement to join a party at Hurlingham made up on purpose for her, and it could easily be managed if there were no risk of chance encounters. Charlotte, indeed, had been ready to give up the party, quite absurd about it—still, why should she?

"Only that I don't care about it, mum; I really don't. And I should *not* like Drax to know."

"My dear, why should he know?"

This had been argued out beforehand, and now Charlotte was silent and her mother triumphant. Certain people had been included in the party whose acquaintance it was desirable to make, "and you know *I* am not asked," said the widow, artfully, "so we lose the opportunity altogether if you excuse yourself."

"Then I can't go to the Lyles' dinner; I can't do both."

"Certainly not; not for worlds. But the dinner is nothing; I can say you have a headache——"

"Let us send round at once then," suggested Charlotte, who was almost always good-natured; "it is a shame to throw them over at the last moment. Let me out, and you drive on to Green Street, and send up the message."

"Stop, stop! you may be seen at Hurlingham. You are too impetuous. Let me manage for you on this occasion."

"How will you manage?"

"Walk in with my apology when the time comes. It is much the simplest thing to do."

"And the rudest and most unkind. However, it is too late to start social virtues at this time of day. Perhaps, who knows, I may turn over a new leaf with Drax——" and a pleasanter expression stole over the speaker's face.

She thought of Drax very kindly, not only at the moment but afterwards. The afternoon did not turn out quite what she had meant it to be. Her own party bored her, and one or two others on whom she was wont to reckon in that place, never came near her. Tregillis' avoidance was even marked, while Lord Robert Aguilar, her most recent acquisition, was not there.

She was forced to put up with second-rate men and listening to the band—a new experience for Miss Charlotte Sunning—and the thought of this, and of how different might have been her part in the gay scene had her lover been parading by her side, made her reception of him when he appeared in the evening all that was soft and gentle.

They went out upon the balcony and talked of their first meeting there, and of all that had transpired since. All the "Do you remembers," and "What did you mean by thats"—language of lovers from time immemorial—were soon in full play; and he had to tell of the first, the very first dawnings of love within his breast, of hopes that rose and fell, of the final despair occasioned by her cruel note forbidding his return to the cottage; and yet again—and here Charlotte's lips fell apart and her dancing eyes proclaimed how much

to her was the avowal—of how the flame, which he had held to be extinguished forever, flared up with undiminished ardour at the very first—no, to be strictly correct, he laughed and checked himself—at the second sight of her.

"At the 'second' sight, sir?" cried she, starting away from him with tragic horror. "The 'second'? You dare to tell me you needed a 'second'? Pray, where were your eyes at the 'first'?"

He protested. He had only had a passing glimpse, the merest flash of sunshine—he had not felt its touch upon him, had not come under the spell. "I suppose the truth was, though," appended he, in natural tones, "that I thought it was no good."

"But you thought it *was* good on the second occasion?"

"Well, you called me, you know."

Whereat Charlotte took up the theme and played upon it; and as she did so, with his arm around her and her fair head resting on his shoulder, while every now and then he stole a kiss, he cared not how long it took to argue and disclaim.

"You cared for me all along?" he whispered.

"What does 'all along' mean?" she smiled back.

"Oh, since—since——"

"Henley?"

"Oh, I say! No, I am not quite such a vain ass as that," laughed Drax. "Good heavens, no! But down at the cottage—on those days up the river—when we sat on the lawn in the moonlight—you did really and truly care for me then?"

She lifted her head and looked into his eyes. "I did really and truly care for you—then." . . .

As soon as she was alone, Charlotte proceeded to salve her conscience. "But I don't at all mind you now," quoth she, apostrophising the lover who had just de-

parted. "You are faithful to me, which is more than can be said of others I could name"—thinking of the afternoon's defaulters—"and if you could always be kept to the style of conversation you adopted to-night, I should never find you dull. As for your looks, it is perhaps a little unlucky that they have lost their glamour for myself, still, I admire them for other people. I shall be proud to take you about. We must trot round in the autumn, as of course you will be asked wherever I go. You will do very well. The men like you, and I fancy you would hold your own out-of-doors as well as in. Yes, you are a nice fellow, Drax," mused she, contentedly, "and certainly you will make an ideal bridegroom on the wedding-day. The wedding-day? Heigho!"—a short, quick breath. "Well, and why not the wedding-day?" she ran on the next minute; "why not—why not? It can't be for three or four months yet; it would never do to fix it before October, the very end of October—that would be the soonest we could get people together, and the mourning would be excuse enough for Drax—otherwise, I daresay the dear fellow might be rather impatient. Now, Charlotte!"

'Now, Charlotte!' was mentally spoken in another tone. "I do get so abominably sarcastic and ill-conditioned," muttered she. "Now, I meant to sneer at Drax, though goodness knows why. Is he not 'a dear fellow'? And do I want him not to be 'impatient'? I am not worthy of him. I'm not—I'm not. I am only a——"

"Well, love, still up?" A voice from the dusky interior of the room, and Mrs. Sunning, returned from her dinner-party, rustled forward. "Has he been?" continued she, glancing round and forming her own conclusions. "Yes? And—and nothing has happened, I suppose?"

"The doctors say that as there have been a few signs of consciousness this afternoon, the end may not be so imminent as they thought at first," replied Charlotte, demurely.

"Ah!" Mrs. Sunning paused. "It is 'the end' though?" said she, in the tone of a person desirous of having a clear understanding on the point, "they certainly consider it is the end? He could not possibly linger on indefinitely?"

"Oh dear, no."

"No one could wish it. To be a helpless invalid, and," casting her eyes upwards, "dragging on here on earth instead of being released——"

Charlotte laughed a little impatiently.

"Dear mum, *don't!*" She caught her mother by the shoulders. "Not now, not when we may have only a little while longer together; you know I always did dislike that particular sort of hum, and I warn you it won't take in the Rotherhams. Well, never mind," patting the offended shoulder consolingly, "just you understand that, and you will get along all right. I know what you mean about Drax's father, and it is all very natural and so forth——"

"My love, it would be a strain. Those poor girls!"

"Yes, those poor girls—but it is our poor selves you are thinking of. You fancy that I am bursting with impatience to give out the engagement——"

"Who could blame you if you were?"

"But I'm not. I'm content to wait. It was a different thing when I did not know one way or the other, and every one was teasing me, and Drax like a sphinx. He has explained it all now; by the way, we had quite a mountain torrent of explanations;" and she smiled with a happy look.

It was seldom that this word suited Charlotte; bright,

piquant, charming, enchanting, were epithets that could be freely bestowed, but she had scarcely the face of a happy girl. Even her mother perceived something new.

"How sweet!" she murmured.

"What?" said Charlotte, quickly.

"Nothing, my dear; nothing. I was only thinking how well I remember—it takes me back to other days when I, too—I was just your age, Charlotte; no, a very little younger, but no matter—I felt as you do now. Your dear father——"

"I think you loved him," said Charlotte, in a softer tone. "But neither you nor I are what is called loving women," and she fell into a muse.

Presently she looked up.

"Mother, I am really—what shall I call it?—fond of Drax Rotherham. I daresay more will come in time; it does grow, doesn't it? People say so, and that regard, esteem, etc., etc., are the best foundation—oh, I know all the wise old commonplaces, so now I mean to try what they are worth. But between you and me, there need not be any making-believe. One thing, however," she continued in a lighter tone, "it may ease your mind to know that I am not fretting under what you are pleased to call the 'strain'. I am content to wait, as I said before. Now, tell me about your party. Who was there? Who did you have in to dinner? What did the Lyles say about me?"—the latter demand evincing an increase of interest.

"I am afraid Mrs. Lyle received your excuses very coolly. She was not in the least sympathetic, and I am sure I saw a smile on the son's face."

"Very likely;" Charlotte smiled cheerfully. "Franky saw me at Hurlingham; in fact, he hung about me most of the afternoon. I said nothing to you, as I knew it would only put you out."

"But my love—however, I only said your headache had suddenly come on, I did not say *when*, and I was just in the middle of it, doing my very best for you, when that meddlesome, mischief-making, little Mrs. Grote——"

"Was she there?"

"Her husband sat on my other side at dinner, a nice, inoffensive man—but she is a minx. She came up to me the moment we were in the drawing-room again, and loud enough for Mrs. Lyle to hear, indeed she *meant* her to hear, said: 'Charlotte's headaches do come on very often now, don't they? And very suddenly too? I never thought she would have thrown me over last night, when she herself fixed the day.'"

"So I did. Susie had me there."

"It was very ridiculous of her; but you might have looked in for half-an-hour."

"For which I should have taken an hour to dress! I did not want to go, and if she is so silly as to force me to say it——"

"She will not; I think you will be pleased when you hear. It came to me like an inspiration; I said you had gone to see some friends, and finding them in great trouble, had stayed on at the house trying to help and comfort, until it was too late."

"Mum!"

"It was so very near the truth, you know, Charlotte."

"So near and yet so far. I don't mind a straight-forward, up-and-down lie," said Charlotte, laughing in spite of herself, "but your pretty little shavings of the truth—however, good-night," turning abruptly away, for with the last words there sounded an echo of her own voice in her ears; and what was truth while yet no truth if it was not her "I did really and truly care for you—*then*?"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GREAT ANNOUNCEMENT.

DAYS passed, a week passed, a fortnight passed, and still there was no material change in the elder Mr. Rotherham's condition, and still, to the ineffable satisfaction of Charlotte's mother, and perhaps to her own secret surprise, Charlotte's wonderful mood lasted.

No one could have shown to greater advantage in the hushed and solemn mansion than did the radiant young creature who appeared there morning by morning like a ray of summer sunshine. She was never too bright nor too effulgent; her voice, with its fine, full intonation, was always pleasantly subdued. She stepped lightly about, but she did not run.

Then she brought little offerings—and accepted others not quite so little. Drax was rather magnificent in his ideas. She made propositions which no one else would have ventured upon, but which were eagerly acceded to.

Addy and Evie felt that if Charlotte saw no objection to their doing this thing or that, the objection could not possibly exist. The boys took a bolder plunge, and rebelled against a family interdict, prompted by the hope of her support. "Couldn't they go to the 'Oval'—to the 'Oval,' not to 'Lord's'—to see the big match, one of the biggest matches of the year?" Drax said they couldn't. But if *she* gave them leave, Drax would never say a word. Laughing and defying him to his face, *she*

gave it, and he bowed to the decree with the grace of a true and loyal knight.

How the lads adored Charlotte! Poor little Huby, stumbling with a fearful crash over a flower-pot on the staircase, in his hurry to fetch something she wanted, was more than consoled by her smile for the frowns of others.

Hal, vexed with the inattention of his sisters to a tale of thrilling interest, triumphantly reserved himself for Charlotte's ear in future. The old nurse was won over at the first interview.

All of this suited Miss Charlotte Sunning very well; and in justice to her it must be added that if the fair being who thus held all hearts in thrall was not precisely the London beauty known in club-room and smoking-room, she was not consciously acting a part. She was simply allowing herself to be swayed by the feelings uppermost at the moment, charmed for once to find that prudence coincided with inclination.

"But, my dear, is this to go on for ever?" It was Mrs. Sunning who began to grow lugubrious over the prospect at last. "Cannot the doctors say *anything*? They were so confident at the first."

"There was another consultation this morning," replied Charlotte, who had just returned from Carlton House Terrace, "but it did not seem to have much effect upon the patient. It was like the barometer which 'didna' seem to hae mickle effect' upon the weather," she added, laughing.

"You mean you heard no result?" said her mother, impatiently.

"I looked over the banisters as the two old fatties went puffing and blowing down, and heard them saying to each other 'A peculiar case—a peculiar case'"—mimicking.

"Was that all they could say?"

"And all Drax got for his ten guineas. I inquired afterwards, and he said they came to the conclusion that they knew nothing about paralysis. I can hear them saying it. 'We know nothing about paralysis—nothing about paralysis'"—again puffing out her cheeks and wagglng her head in imitation of the portly medicos.

Mrs. Sunning saw nothing to laugh at.

"And they had the impertinence to pocket five guineas apiece for knowing nothing about what they were called in for!" cried she. "Disgraceful!" But she could not hurry the dying man.

At last, "I don't see why the boys should stop on here any longer," said Drax, one day. "Their term exams. are important—for Hal especially. For Hal this exam. is awfully important. Even the little fellows have been working hard, and it is rough on them to lose their places—I shall take them back to-morrow"—he came to a decision, and set off for Charles Street to announce it.

"You are doing *what*?"

The question was certainly Charlotte's, and as certainly it was Charlotte who was standing up before her lover all beauty and splendour, but so unusual was the tone that he was almost guilty of the rudeness of starting. After a momentary hesitation, however, he replied calmly:—

"We have kept them with us so long, expecting that every day might be the last——"

"And you don't expect that now?" Again the quick, sharp accent.

"Not since this improvement set in."

"What improvement? I did not hear of any 'improvement'. I thought the doctors said they could say

nothing—as doctors always do. And now you are going away——”

“Charlotte does not like your going, Drax”—a smooth voice from behind—but Mrs. Sunning threw a warning glance at her daughter across the broad back which intervened; “she will miss you. We shall all miss you——”

“Is that it?” His brow cleared as by magic, and there was a glance at Charlotte’s hand which played with the tassels of a cushion near. She thought he was going to take it, and it was hastily withdrawn.

“Of course,” she acquiesced, a little sullenly. “It does seem strange to be—to be going——”

“But only for one day, dear,” he overflowed with joy and gratitude. “I need not even stay the night if you would rather I did not. ’Cross country trains are exceedingly tiresome, and never fit; but I daresay I could manage.”

“No, no! don’t let me be ridiculous; don’t give in to my whims. I am a little out of sorts to-day, Drax.” At this point Mrs. Sunning stole away, and did not return until after he had gone.

“Yes, you put it to rights, my dear, tolerably well after I gave you the hint,” observed she, drily; “but you startled him. He has never seen you like that, and his blank face——”

“Tut! I can’t always be smiling, and the thing grows monotonous. Let me say it to you, and I shan’t to other people. It is not Drax I complain of, but why *won’t* that old man die? His living on and on—I never bargained for that. It cuts me off from all my own people——”

“I have expected this all along,” said Mrs. Sunning, in a quiet voice that had a curious effect upon her daughter’s rising excitement. “I thought the present

state of things was too good to last; and you may remember that I never advocated your immersing yourself in the Rotherhams as you have done. I knew you would miss your old ways and—friends.” The last word had a peculiar and significant emphasis.

Charlotte was silent.

“Directly I saw you with Lord Tarporley yesterday,” proceeded her mother, keenly watchful, “I prognosticated this.”

“Pray, what has Tarpy to do with it?”

“You have not been the same ever since.”

“Good gracious! did any one ever hear such nonsense?” cried Charlotte, in a high voice. “Poor old Tarpy! Mine own familiar Tarpy! Not even ‘mine’ now, and as innocuous as a babe. I was very glad to make up with him again, for we both agreed that we had felt somehow as if we had quarrelled, though we couldn’t imagine why. I asked him outright why he had not been to see us, and why he kept away from me that day at Hurlingham and he was just as frank back. He said he had been taken up with his own affairs, and understood I was equally so with mine. Can’t you see it is *that* which provokes me, mother, and isn’t it enough? They are all on the look out, and directly they get the chance they prod and probe me like so many lancets—even that silly little Susie Grote goes feeling about with a pin—and I can say nothing back. If we had only given it out at the first!”

“Indeed, I wish we had. It would have been much more sensible. Or even told a few, and let it leak out. But we could not suppose, no one could have supposed, that a whole fortnight would pass——”

“Just what I say, and then you blame me! And then for Drax to come here looking quite pleased and expecting me to be pleased, and talking about the ‘improve-

ment '—I really wonder I did not show up worse than I did."

"It was quite enough, my dear. Still I do feel for you, and perhaps you will now permit me to talk about the 'strain';" Mrs. Sunning would not have been human if she had refrained from this reminder. "It was only that I was more quick to discern for you than you for yourself; I reflected, 'Charlotte has never been accustomed to people of the Rotherhams' type—'"

"The Rotherhams are very nice people; I wish there were more of their type."

"Quite so, quite so. All that is amiable and excellent——"

"My dear mother, what on earth has come over you? Don't you want me to like the Rotherhams?" said Charlotte in genuine surprise. "Amiable? excellent?—and if ever in your life you meant to disparage——"

"Listen, listen, you foolish girl. I only want a little moderation. Your plan, Charlotte, is to bottle yourself up and then explode. I am older and wiser; I say you *cannot* amalgamate all at once with a family so totally unlike any other you have ever been used to——"

"They are not unlike the Dimsdales. They will suit Henny-Penny down to the ground."

"And how do you feel among the Dimsdales? Like a fish out of water, you have always told me."

"The fish must learn to swim in the water, especially as it is to be her future native element. Still, I don't say that you are not right, mum; for the element certainly does seem to have disagreed with me during the last twenty-four hours. What remedy do you suggest?"

"Don't avoid people as you have been doing. Never mind what they say. You know you have the laugh on your side, and will very soon be able to laugh aloud. A little patience is all that is needed."

But it did not appear that even patience was needed, for as the last words fell from Mrs. Sunning's lips, she turned her head to catch the sound of a voice in the hall, and Charlotte also paused expectant. The door of the little room they were in stood open for the heat, and a man's step was heard following the voice. Drax! What had Drax returned for?

He did not keep them in suspense for an instant.

"I do not need to go," he said, quietly; "my father passed away when I was here just now."

"Well, I suppose you are all full of the engagement," said Sir Herbert Dimsdale, unexpectedly appearing at home one day shortly after this. "I heard it at the club. I knew by the very first look of you all that you had heard," casting a humorous glance round. "Well, my dear," continued the worthy gentleman, addressing his wife, "so it has come off at last? I hope you're pleased?"

Pleased? Lady Henrietta was exuberant. If Charlotte had manœuvred the delay which had set all her little world on tenterhooks, she could not have succeeded in bringing it to a close with greater *éclat*. Her uncle Claybury himself called to congratulate; and, having sat for full ten minutes with his sister-in-law—which was as much of her as he could stand, and more than he had stood for many a long day—he was now at the Dimsdales, hearing what Henrietta had to say about it.

"We were getting a bit nervous, you know," confided Sir Herbert, turning to him; "we expected it—pho!—a month ago. The idea was that the two had started their love-making last autumn and got through the bulk of it—what, am I not to tell?" for Henrietta was frowning and signalling. "Oh, it's settled now, so one can

say anything. Did she write to you?" again addressing his brother-in-law.

"Mamma did," said Lord Claybury, succinctly.

"Mamma's pen must have been going all night," laughed the jolly baronet. "Every one seems to know. Kitty, what do you say to it? And by the way, what does George say to it? But he cried off in time, artful young scamp! He saw what was coming and hedged. I suppose Dulcibella——"

"Oh, it isn't Dulcibella now," laughed Kitty.

"A new one, is there? A great philanderer is George," George's father jocosely informed whomsoever it might concern; "but Charlotte was his first; she fleshed his maiden sword for him, ha, ha! What says the young lady herself? Have any of you seen her?"

No one had, but she was expected later in the afternoon, and Mr. Rotherham with her.

"We must not forget to be solemn and all that," said Sir Herbert, on hearing this. "By all accounts he is a punctilious fellow, and I fancy it must have been his doing that the engagement was kept dark till after the funeral. Do the Sunnings say so?" he demanded of his wife.

But when he found that the Sunnings had not said so it made no difference.

"She never tells the truth, so it's no matter what she says," observed he, comfortably. "So Charlotte is coming by herself to-day? That's all right; Madam would have been too much for me."

"I called there just now," said Lord Claybury, with conscious virtue.

"You did? And saw her? She would be proud of that. And of course every one within a radius of twenty miles will hear about it before the day is out, and *that* is what has secured us our immunity," Sir Herbert rubbed

his hands with glee; "she has got to go round with the news, not only of this blessed, thrice blessed, engagement, but to edge in by hook or by crook what Charlotte's dear uncle Claybury said of it——"

"'Pon my word, I don't know what I did say," interposed Lord Claybury, with an alarmed look. "I hope it was all right. But that woman always puts me in a twitter——"

"So she puts Herbert." It was Henrietta who had got her turn at last. "He says her lisp annoys him; but the poor thing cannot help her lisp, and I do think you are both a little severe;" her own face beaming with mild reproach.

"Hen never thinks ill of any human being," interpolated her husband.

"Much the best way," grunted her brother.

"I am so glad he called," continued the kindly lady, and looked across the latter to the former with the utmost satisfaction; "an attention such as that could not but be appreciated, and you need not wonder, Herbert, if it is made much of. It was very kind, extremely kind, of Claybury to call;" and Claybury looked as if he thought so himself.

"On an occasion, you know," said he, deprecating the condescension.

"I must say I am uncommonly glad for Charlotte," proceeded Sir Herbert. "Charlotte has always been a favourite of mine, and I wouldn't for the world have seen her throw herself away on any one of those fast men about Town, who are always dangling about her. You can't go into the house without finding some longlegs or other, and I was always afraid she would end with one of them—the worst of the lot it was sure to be. I was always very sorry, very sorry indeed," he was now speaking seriously, as a father should, "to see her in such a set.

They weren't men I should have liked to see hanging about a daughter of mine, and poor James would have liked it as little had he been alive. But her mother——"

"That's not quite fair on aunt Cecilia," said Kitty, in a low voice.

"Eh? What? What did Kitty say?" Sir Herbert, who was slightly deaf, turned to his wife for information. "Oh, but I never said it was altogether her doing," proceeded he, on receiving it. "Of course, Charlotte is strong enough, and clever enough to hold her own, and to go her own way, whoever tried to prevent her, but she couldn't, she *couldn't*," emphatically, "have got in with that sort of men if her mother had set her face against it."

"I think she could," said Kitty, in the same low voice.

"Claybury, what do you think?" Finding himself worsted in the combat, Sir Herbert, slightly flustered, appealed for support to his brother-in-law, but his lordship had now done all that he considered could be required of the august head of the family, and had no suggestions to offer. It was Lady Henrietta who took up the theme.

"Whatever may have been amiss in the past, we are going to see all right in the future," said she. "Dear Charlotte's very choice proves that. Mr. Rotherham is——"

"A fine, straightforward fellow, and the very man for her;" Sir Herbert once more took the lead. "There's an idea at the clubs," he added, knowingly, "that he is a bit strait-laced. If that is so, Charlotte——" but the entrance of servants prevented his proceeding with a conjecture whose tenor may be imagined.

"If that is so, Charlotte?——" queried little Kitty of herself, and went away and thought. . . .

At every place where met the gay world that afternoon the news of Charlotte Sunning's engagement spread like wildfire. It was one of the last days of the season, while yet there were no manifest signs of its break-up, and there was a more than usually full 'Park'. Charlotte, if absent in body—(and she was decorously elsewhere, taking her first drive with Drax, who turned his horses' heads northwards, and piloted his fair mistress through regions to her unknown by 'Happy Hampstead' and Highgate)—if, we say, her tall figure with its peculiar splendour and brilliancy of apparel was missed from the humming crowds on the lawn where so many of her friends were assembled, it may be averred that her spirit was not only there, but in every part at once.

Dowagers and débutantes, grey-haired statesmen and rubicund City men, as well as the idlers of Piccadilly took an interest in the topic of the hour. Some thought that, considering all things, the young lady had not secured such a 'big pot' as might have been expected; others, on the contrary, vowed that she had done extraordinarily well—likewise 'considering'—"For such very go-ahead young women don't always——" laughed a big-wig, whose business it was to preside over a certain court—and he let the sentence finish itself.

Lord Tarporley and Sir George Tregillis walked together in the promenade.

"They are all jabbering about it in there," said the former, "and I expect there aren't many pleasant things being said. Let's keep out of it, George."

"Oh, I don't want to be in it," said George, gloomily.

"It's all right, you know. A good thing all round; she took a fancy to him at the first."

"And got over it and dropped him—till he was worth the picking up again."

Tarpy laughed.

"I daresay. Charlotte couldn't marry a poor man, you know."

"I don't say she could. She knows her own business ; but it's beastly hard luck for me. I always hoped something would turn up to put a stop to it."

"Because of the sister?"

"Of course, because of the sister."

"You really mean to stick to what you said the other night?"

"I mean it, and I'll do it," said Tregillis, doggedly. "I don't say one thing one day and another the next. You needn't laugh ; I don't"—his face growing red.

"There are the Hulls bowing to us," said Tarporley, and the two hats went off as a carriage passed. "Pretty girl, Molly Hull. Something in Charlotte's style. So you object to this marriage, do you?"

"I object to marrying into the same family."

"For myself I shouldn't have minded," said Lord Tarporley, in the same apathetic tone. "I like Charlotte, you know."

"You wouldn't like her as a relation."

"If you mean as a wife, I have given you my opinion upon that point already, as you may remember."

"I remember jolly well. It was I who had to remind you of it at the Mitchams'."

"Remind yourself of the rest, then. I said in any other capacity she was and is the woman I admire most in the world."

Tregillis stared.

"No, I don't think you went as far as that, Tarporley. I don't ; really I don't."

"Don't you? It's a fact."

"But—I say—you wouldn't like some one I could name to hear you."

"Any one may hear me. I am simply stating the truth."

"She is as different from Miss Vancouver as chalk from cheese!"

"So she is."

"I don't understand it. That isn't how I feel anyhow. I couldn't admire one woman more than any one else in the world, and want another for my wife who was just her opposite. Besides, I know you kept out of Charlotte's way when you first got back; you said Miss Vancouver might not care for her."

"I don't suppose she would—or will. And I want Charlotte to understand that I'm going to be a good boy and keep out of mischief. But we've had it out, and it's all right. She is taking to herself a husband, and I to myself a wife; and we shall each turn into highly respectable members of society forthwith. As long as I wasn't sure about Rotherham I thought it safest to keep clear of Charlotte; but she told me—never mind what; she has made her words good anyhow. If you'll take my advice, George, which of course you won't, you'll forget all that nonsense."

"It isn't nonsense, and I mean to stick to it. You don't understand; you don't feel as I do; you never had any illusion about Charlotte. I had. You know I had. And now that I know how I was deceived in her, I simply hate her. I hate to think how I was befooled, and to see myself over again in Rotherham."

"Rather nasty that, I allow."

"And his sister—I do assure you, Tarporley, she's the nicest little girl, and I could have been so happy with her—but she, too, believes every word Charlotte says, and so do they all, they are all infatuated—so I just knocked off a month ago, and I'm glad I did. But it *is* hard——" and tears stood in the honest fellow's eyes.

"What is Sir George Tregillis looking unutterable things at me about?" cried a saucy voice, and a small, dressed-up person resolutely barred the way.

As Sir George had not been looking at Mrs. Jephson at all, he was sufficiently bewildered by the charge to stop as he was meant to do, though Lord Tarporley strolled on and was soon lost to view.

"Do come and talk about Charlotte Sunning," proceeded Olivia, with the utmost vivacity. "You have heard, of course. We are all so pleased. I have just been congratulating the Dimsdales. They are over there with Mrs. Sunning, who is having her hand shaken off, and looks as young as her daughter with joy and excitement. They have quite a crowd round them. Charlotte has not seen fit to put in an appearance, and neither has Mr. Rotherham. Of course he couldn't, as his father's funeral——"

"I am afraid, Mrs. Jephson, I have an appointment."

"A very pressing one? I could tell you a lot more about Charlotte. You used to be a great friend of hers," with a sly glance.

He muttered something inaudible.

"I see. One of her many great friends who are ready to tear Mr. Rotherham's eyes out now," ran on Olivia, facetiously. "My dear Sir George, they are all over the place. Every second man you meet is watching the other to see how he takes it. There is poor Gerry Brown, as white as milk——"

"Mrs. Jephson, I—I really——"

"*You* aren't white, I must say that for you. You have got all the blood of all the Tregillises in your cheeks; but are they always quite such a fine red in London? Are they not burning a little, just a very little?"

"They are not only burning but peeling. Got regularly skinned those three broiling days at Henley." He

was afraid to show his rage, and hoped to create a diversion.

"At Henley? You went to Henley again this year? I thought the experience of last would have put a stop to that. It was Henley that began *it*, you know, this engagement; Charlotte told me so herself; and you were there; you must have seen it coming on?——"

"Of course. And—and—it's an excellent thing. Are you alone? Can I take you to——"

"To my carriage. Yes, please. And if you like, I'll drive you to your 'appointment'; which is very good of me, considering that I don't believe in its existence. Dear me, Sir George, can't you stand a little chaff? Of course I know you don't really care two straws who Charlotte Sunning marries——"

But though she made room for him by her side, he lifted his hat and turned away.

"That's the beginning," muttered she, with a frown. She had always insisted upon it to herself that Charlotte's men were her men, and that she could be as free with them as her friend. Lord Tarporley, indeed, had stolidly declined an acquaintanceship. "I object to that little black cat," he told Charlotte; but Tregillis had been more amenable, and his present attitude was ominous. Was he, and were others of his sort henceforth to be lost to her? She drove to her brother's lodgings.

"Sebastian, have you heard?"

"Heard what?" said he. His hands were full of papers, and a portmanteau and other travelling gear arrested her attention at the same instant.

"Have you been out of Town? For how long? When did you come back?" ran on Olivia, in her wonted rapid fashion. "Are you only just returned? This very minute?" and she drew in her breath, and

drummed her fingers on the table, impatient of a certain abstraction in his air.

"You must have followed me up the staircase," said he; "yes, I came from York——"

"How long have you been away?"

"Three weeks. First, I had a fortnight's holiday. Then I had to attend a conference——"

"Attend to me now. Have you heard—your full attention, please—put those papers down till I go—have you heard anything of what has happened in your absence?"

"Nothing. What has happened?" His mind was still elsewhere.

"Your friend Rotherham might have told you. It was not treating you very well——"

"My dear Olivia, I saw it in the paper, and Rotherham would know this. There was no occasion for him to write."

"My dear Sebastian, you did *not* see it in the paper, and Mr. Rotherham could have written very well."

Alban turned and busied himself among his papers. A light broke in upon him.

"Why do you pretend to think I mean old Mr. Rotherham's death?" continued his sister. "You know I don't. And you know what I do mean very well. What did we have that great conversation about six weeks ago? It was you who came to me, not I who went to you, on that occasion. What object had you then so much at heart that you did not pursue the very, very most honourable means of attaining it? Come, come, sir; *I* remember, if you have forgotten. And you went away from me in a rage, and left me to pursue my investigations unaided; and when I tried to enlist your sympathies afterwards, you turned upon me, you traitor, you fellow-conspirator, ha, ha, ha!—but you couldn't undo what you

had once done, my little Sebastian. Well, now, do you understand?" and she took him by the elbow, and shook it playfully.

"I understand."

"Heavens! what a hollow, vault-like tone! I wouldn't give myself away like that, however badly I felt. It never does to show when one is checkmated. Not that it matters before me, for I know you of old, and your iron will; and now Mr. Rotherham will have to feel what it is like to oppose it. Still, he has scored one in the meantime, Sebastian, my dear."

"When did the—the engagement take place?"

"Immediately before the old gentleman had his seizure, and as he was supposed to be going to die each day, they waited to give it out till he did. But I thought *you* would have been told?"

Alban shook his head.

"Did not think the news would be very agreeable?" hinted she.

"Rotherham knows I was opposed to it," said her brother, after a momentary pause, "and that being so, why should he be in a hurry to tell me before other people? But you speak as if you had only just heard?" he concluded.

"Having waited so long for the death, they thought it but decent to wait a little longer for the funeral. It took place yesterday, and last night we were all electrified. I don't suppose there is a soul in our set who does not know to-day." Olivia loved to talk of 'our set,' and it was secretly some little compensation for her other vexations to be able to do so at this juncture.

"I suppose every one is—pleased?"

"Of course," ironically. "Sir George Tregillis treading on air, and Gerry Brown breathing benedictions! Charlotte is an egregious flirt, and egregious flirts have

always holocausts of well-wishers when they marry, haven't they? Poor Gerry, his is the worst case."

"Was Charlotte—was she there to-day?"

"Again that hollow, sepulchral tone? Charlotte is to be married, not buried, my dear sir. And she was disporting herself, no doubt, to her entire satisfaction somewhere else this afternoon. No, no; Charlotte was not there. Charlotte is on her good behaviour, don't you know? She was with her dear Drax."

A spasm passed over his face.

"So, good-bye, *mon cher*, and cheer up;" Olivia prepared to take her departure not without a suspicion of having inflicted a good deal of annoyance in the most skilful and artistic manner, and not without the pleasure of a petty, malicious nature in so doing. "What can't be cured, must be endured. Evidently this absurd marriage was to be, and when a thing is to be neither you nor I, nor all the powers in Christendom can prevent it. I—ahem!—did my best."

He looked up inquiringly.

"Oh, I put every spoke I knew into the wheel. Enlightened by your valuable information"—he winced—"I worked it for all it was worth. First, I——"

"I would rather not hear, Olivia."

"Oh, but you must. And you shan't drive me away. I'm going; but I won't be driven. Fie, Sebastian, turn a lady out!" laughing and struggling, for he had hold of her hand, and was gently leading her to the door.

Rather to her surprise he replied in the same gay tone:—

"Terrible scene in the West End: a lady forcibly ejected into the street by her brother—a clergyman——"

"A well-known and highly popular rector——"

"And the lady a leader of the fashionable world!"

"Sebastian, you wretch!"—but she was laughing and

mollified. "I suppose you really are awfully busy, but you might have told me so, and I would have gone peaceably. Now, if I don't, I suppose you will call a policeman?"

"Undoubtedly. There is one always about here."

"Needs must, then. But at least you might say 'Thank you' for my trouble in coming. And, look here, mind you congratulate properly and all that, now the thing's *done*. It's no earthly use quarrelling with your bread and butter; and though you can never hope to have Drax Rotherham in leading-strings again—(Charlotte will take care of that)—he may still be good for subscriptions—I see you understand; bye-bye," and pretending now extreme haste, she flew downstairs and vanished.

Sebastian Alban stood absolutely still where he was.

About an hour later another visitor was ushered in, one for whose appearance he had been waiting throughout that hour, and to meet whom he rose from the chair in which he had sat idly from the moment Olivia left him.

A slight nervousness was perceptible in Rotherham's countenance and manner, but there was none in that of his friend, who, dispensing with the ordinary greeting, at once and cordially took him by the hand, exclaiming:—

"Rotherham, my dear fellow, I know what you have come to tell me. And now sit down, and let me hear about it?" continued the speaker, pushing forward an easy-chair, and subsiding into another himself. "Don't look there, all those things can wait," catching a glance towards the over-loaded writing-table. "I am at leisure, perfectly and completely at leisure, for as long as ever you can stay, and if you had not come to me this evening, I should have gone to you."

"First, tell me how you are yourself," said Rotherham, with a sense of relief in not being the bearer of his own tidings, yet even now with a vague reluctance towards plunging into them. "Are you better? Have you got rid of your cough? You don't look very, very——"

"Not so blooming as you, I daresay," with a significant smile. "But I'm all right. Cough's ever so much better, thanks. Not quite gone yet, but going. My sister, who was here just now, saw nothing to alarm her—that I can testify to, for she made no inquiries, and had entirely forgotten my having had to go away;" and he laughed a little bitterly.

"It was your sister who told you about—us?"

"She ran in just now, very full of it. By the way, Rotherham, your father, I don't need to tell you, you have my true sympathy, and I think I understand your feelings on the subject. You must have had a painful and trying time, but you were a most dutiful son, and it must have been a consolation to your father to know that he could entrust his other children to your care with every confidence."

"I don't know that he thought much about it, but of course he could," said Drax, simply. "And—and Charlotte will help me now."

"Yes; well, tell me about her," genially. "I hope she knows with what a steady flame your true love burnt all along? I couldn't extinguish it, could I? Look here," continued Alban, pulling up his chair and laying a friendly hand on the other's knee, "we have both rather uncomfortable memories at this moment, and when you came in just now, you would sooner have bearded a lion in his den—confess now, would you not? Don't you worry about it," patting the knee affectionately; "say to yourself that Alban was a well-meaning chap, who had formed what he believed to be a true judgment on a

certain lady—but that the wisest of us is sometimes mistaken, and"—emphatically—"set about to prove this. Rotherham, it is possible, it is more than possible, that you may be able to show the world in your wife a new Charlotte—(may I call her so for the last time?). How deeply and truly glad I shall be if you are, and if your happiness is thus ensured, need I say?"

"Thank you, Alban. I *was* a little afraid of you, you know."

"And you are not now?"

"Oh, no!" Drax laughed, coloured, and drew himself up with the air of a gallant whom nothing could daunt. "You see I am so awfully happy. It sounds odd to say to *you* that she is so much too good for me, but that is how I feel. I wish you could have seen her during all that time when we were waiting for the end, when we should have been so—so—but for her. She was an angel in the house. The boys and girls would say the same. She is as fond of them as she can be already, and they simply worship her. And she really doesn't seem the same even to me as she did before. I am sure you would see it; I am *sure* you would," earnestly.

He waited a moment, and continued:—

"We were engaged the very day my father was taken ill. It was the day before you left. I thought of going round to tell you, only——" he hesitated.

"I understand. Take it for granted I understand, Rotherham."

An hour's talk followed, and Rotherham rose to go.

"Are you dining with the Sunnings?" inquired Alban.

"No; I have had as much of Charlotte as I could lay claim to this afternoon. Besides, I told her I was coming round here, and if you had been out I should have waited."

"Yes, I see," absently.

"She sent you her love."

Alban stooped to pick up a paper on the floor.

"I was to tell you that next time she said 'Good-night' to you she hoped you would say it back," continued Drax, laughing. "She told me about your meeting that evening, and that you bolted into a hansom to get away from her——"

"No, no!——"

"But she hoped you would be the best of friends in the future."

"We shall never be anything but—friends;" but the words were spoken in rather a low tone, and the face of the speaker was hidden.

.
"I am glad that's over, however," said Drax to himself, walking away; "the one person in the world I minded telling about it. He isn't won round yet; I could not expect that; but I'm sure no one could have been kinder; and when I said about Charlotte sending her love, and hoping they would be friend he was quite overcome. Perhaps he felt he had been unjust? Perhaps——" but the salutation of a friend cut short further conjectures and meditations.

And he never knew, and no one ever knew, that a dreamer dreamed a dream that night, and that his lonely chamber was filled with the radiance of a celestial creature, whose eyes beamed love, whose hands were stretched towards him, and whose voice, sweet as music, rang out merrily, yet, ah! so tenderly, the words, "Good-night, Sebastian!"

CHAPTER XVII.

"A THOUSAND POUNDS TO BUY LACE!"

A RED October sun was slowly sinking behind the tree-tops; all over rural England sportsmen were wending their way homewards by hedge-row and field-path; while the distant landscape became veiled in mist, and grass and stubble were dank with dew.

A quartette of lively girls, whose recent occupation was evinced by the balls and mallets they carried, emerged from the shrubbery behind Sir Herbert Dimsdale's country house in the Midlands, and, all talking at once, ascended the stone steps leading to a side entrance, where stood Lady Henrietta awaiting them.

Lady Henrietta had to hear about the fortunes of the game. It appeared that her Kitty, who was a renowned player, had not shone on the present occasion; but then she had been weighted by Adeline Rotherham, as to whose prowess the less said the better—whereas Eveline and the vicar's niece (summoned to make a fourth) were both average performers, and combined mediocrity had won the day.

They had all had a pleasant afternoon however, and were ready for the sociable, informal tea in the great hall to which their hostess led the way—the said tea being as unlike the same affair in Seamore Place as was the country dame who presided over it in her straw hat, short petticoats, and thick boots, to the august Lady Henrietta as she presented herself to the eyes of her

fashionable acquaintances during the term of her residence in Town. Her ladyship now looked twenty years younger, and was as merry and noisy as a schoolgirl.

"Mother won't be quite so happy though when aunt Cecilia comes," confided Kitty, who sat a little apart with Adeline. "I am glad we have had this week of you all to ourselves before the Sunnings come. You don't mind my saying that, do you? Aunt Cis and Charlotte are always *London* wherever they go. They talk of the country's being 'charming,' and Charlotte quotes poetry, and aunt Cis falls into raptures over old cottages and bridges, and sketches them like a professional—not as *we* do—and they like to be driven to call on people, and do all sorts of horrid *towny* things. Poor mother toils through it all; and she is so fond of Charlotte, as we all are, you know, that she would go through fire and water for her; but I wish she didn't require such a lot—however, it is all right, for your brother will be able to give her anything and everything," she concluded, laughing.

"Yes," said Adeline, simply.

"I shan't mind this visit at all," Kitty prattled on, eating scones and jam at a prodigious rate the while. "Neither will mother. She is quite in spirits about it. Usually she is a little low the day aunt Cis comes—but she isn't a bit to-day, as you see. We shall talk the wedding, and the presents, and the trousseau; Charlotte will tell us girls about the bridesmaids' dresses; and there will be the fun of watching the two——"

"You won't see much; they are—are awfully careful."

"Are they? Were they so careful at Fairholme?"

Fairholme was a place on the Sussex Downs which Drax had taken for the months of August and September; and there he and his, under the respectable wing of a maiden aunt, had resided since we saw them last.

"Surely they did as they chose at Fairholme?" pur-

sued Kitty. "Went out together, and all that sort of thing?"

"Of course they did *that*. Drax drove Charlotte out nearly every day, and she made him drive tandem, and teach her. They drove miles and miles over the downs."

"Splendid! And every one says they are so tremendously in love——"

But here Lady Henrietta, who saw that something interesting was going on, and who was always more at home with young people than with her own contemporaries, bore down upon the two and good-humouredly thrust herself into the conversation.

"Let me hear; let me hear! I know you are talking about Charlotte. Now, don't stop——"

"No, you really needn't stop for mother," laughed Kitty, with a fond look. "Mother's just one of us. I was asking about the Sunnings at Fairholme," subjoined she.

"Yes? Well, my dear, how did you get on with them? How did they do? Was the visit a success? The young people of course were quite happy, but the mother, how did you manage to amuse her? Mrs. Sunning requires a good deal of amusing."

"Indeed, Lady Henrietta, she required less than—I mean she seemed to settle down to doing nothing in particular better than Charlotte did. I am afraid Charlotte found us stupid."

"She has been used to such gay houses, my dear."

"I am sure that was it; and of course we couldn't be anything but very quiet—quieter than at other times. And then Fairholme. Drax only thought of it as a splendid place for the boys—there were the downs for them to gallop over, and golf links for Hal, and a lake in the grounds where they fished for perch—and alto-

gether *they* were delighted; but Charlotte said it was hardly fair on *us*."

"She would have liked more of a neighbourhood?"

"There were no neighbours—none at least that Charlotte said we could associate with. One or two did call before she came, but we sent aunt Helen to leave cards back, and that was all."

"That was a pity; but just for the short time you were there——"

"Oh, we didn't mind. Evie and I liked it; we could do just as we chose, and it really was a pretty place, with such a garden—but Charlotte rather——"

"Turned up her nose at it," insinuated Kitty. "It is as well Addy should be prepared, mother, for Charlotte's being very grand——"

"But Drax said the cottage was a tiny place," broke in Addy.

"So is the house in Charles Street; Charlotte is 'grand' in it all the same. It isn't the size—it isn't—what is it, mother?" imagination succumbing.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Lady Henrietta, placidly. "Something or other. I am always afraid of Charlotte's looking down on us—yet why she should I don't know. I can't understand it, so I never try. But no doubt your brother will," proceeded the good lady, nodding to Adeline, and helping herself to a fresh slice of cake.

"Oh, yes," said Addy. But as she spoke she caught little Kitty looking at her curiously, and wondered what Kitty was thinking about.

Before the Sunnings came to Fairholme, Drax Rotherham's two young sisters, all aglow with enthusiasm and romance, conceived it a very paradise for lovers.

They wandered about the domain, gloating over its facilities for stolen walks and talks, wondering how soon

it would be before the summer-house on the hill was found out, and if the tangled path buried in the woods would be a favourite resort on twilight evenings. There was a large back drawing-room with a sunny recess, which it would never be safe to enter unheralded.

The engaged couple, however, proved perverse.

They went out together certainly; but they preferred rounds of the stables and kennels, and visits to the south wall of the garden where the fruit was ripe, to secluding themselves further afield.

Charlotte did not care for country rambles; neither she nor her boots were strong enough, she said; she preferred to see the country from the comfortable seat of a dogcart. Accordingly, scarcely an afternoon passed without a drive being undertaken—often prolonged till Mrs. Sunning grew fidgety, having come in herself hours before—and Charlotte would be so tired afterwards that Drax would propose an adjournment to the billiard-room in vain.

Usually billiards were an unfailing resource; for she was a fair player and desirous of improving herself, but all learned to know that after one of the long drives no amount of persuasion would meet with success. Mrs. Sunning, on these occasions, would be eager to interfere, assuring everybody that Charlotte's over-fatigue was due to her anxiety to please her dear charioteer, but that she ought not to have been so prodigal of her strength, she ought to have husbanded it for the evening. "Oh, they can play without me"—here Charlotte would cry out from her sofa.

Once she begged to go to bed, she was so 'good for nothing'; and Drax, all tender consideration, lit her candle, and escorted her to the foot of the staircase; but he did not return to the rest of the party afterwards.

Adeline found him knocking the balls about by him-

self in the billiard-room, yet when she essayed a little sympathetic commiseration, he answered so cheerfully and put out the lights at her suggestion so readily, that she felt quite foolish and re-assured.

There were days when Charlotte was very nice—quite as she was when she first charmed and enthralled all the young hearts to whom her beauty was almost secondary to her endearment.

Perhaps she felt, for she was quick and sensitive, that there was occasionally a vague something hardly to be called disappointment on the faces that still looked to her whenever a question was raised or a point mooted, and could not endure the thought of defection in any shape. Perhaps she merely felt brisk and joyous. Certain it is that any faint misgivings on the part of the young ones would be met at such times by so much gaiety and good-humour, often followed up by some piece of generosity, or some suggestion exactly coinciding with an unspoken wish, that the brothers and sisters alike adored anew—Drax always looking pleased when they did so.

He did not talk to them about Charlotte quite so much as at the first—but that was natural. She was there to speak for herself. No doubt he took it for granted that they recognised the extent of her superiority and the wealth of her charms.

"You would not have me always raving," he said, lightly, one day.

Once Addy came into the room when Charlotte and her mother were having a discussion. They did not perceive her, but she did not know this, and quietly proceeded in search of a book, supposing her presence no interruption.

The following, in the elder lady's voice, fell rudely on her ear:—

"If it is stagnation, you can make amends for it after-

wards—but you ought to be with him at present. You said so yourself.”

“I am quite willing to be with him, if I may have others too, but it is too deadly lively to have only——”

But here there was a pause, and a cough which sounded suspiciously like a warning cough, and the intruder hastily withdrew.

Her cheeks burned. ‘Stagnation’? ‘Deadly lively’? That, of course, might apply to the whole assembled party, and though not very pleasant to hear, could be borne; it was Charlotte’s “I am quite willing to be with him if I may have others too” which sounded so strange and unnatural that Addy would have cut her tongue out rather than repeat it. ‘Others too’? The poor little girl had not quite forgotten a person whose presence by her side was all-sufficient, and could not imagine any one’s feeling differently. ‘Others too’? she pondered.

But that very afternoon the tandem dogcart was at the door; it was a breezy, rainy day, but Charlotte would have her drive, and she wore a rough driving-coat belonging to her lover, and drawn around her by his careful hands—and was she not laughing at him, and making pretty, odd grimaces over his clumsy solicitude, while he as gaily retorted? What could Addy think?

Mrs. Sunning took her aside as the horses bounded down the avenue. Mrs. Sunning was so glad to see dear Charlotte quite herself again. Addy might have noticed that during the past day or two the poor dear girl had been a little out of spirits, inclined to be depressed and take gloomy views of things—here the speaker laughed, and seemed very much amused, “Fancy, gloomy, you know!”—but that was just the one thing about which it was only right to give the Rotherhams a hint. Charlotte in such moods must *not* be taken seri-

ously. She would say all sorts of foolish things, things the very reverse of what she really felt.

"For instance, you know how perfectly and entirely happy the dear child is here among you all," here the widow slipped her hand within a not very willing arm; "I am sure only to look at those two as they set off just now was enough to show that they have not a thought nor a wish apart, and yet—but I daresay you heard what she said this morning? You were in the room?"

"Only for a moment. Yes, I heard something," confusedly.

"You heard a little grumbling, I daresay? The weather, my dear; positively the weather, and nothing else. She had set her heart on going somewhere with your brother; and because I demurred to it, she was so cross with me—with *me*, you understand—and said, I declare I forget what she said, something about its being 'stagnation,' was it not? I was very angry with her. I told her you would go away and think all sorts of things."

It was with secret alarm that she drew from the simple girl what she had both heard and resented on her brother's account, yet not a word durst she say to Charlotte.

Charlotte came in looking so fresh and animated after a glorious scamper over hill and dale, during part of which she had herself held the reins, that the anxious mother threw a glance of triumph at Adeline. It had taken her all her time to explain away the unfortunate occurrence which had cast a shade over that usually serene young brow, and she hardly felt sure of her success till Charlotte and Drax came in together. Then she could direct Addy's doubtful eyes towards their glowing countenances, and thank her stars that the one was unusually demonstrative and the other receptive for

some little time afterwards. It was not always that they were so merry and so much taken up with each other. It might have been purposely arranged.

At every turn Mrs. Sunning's look said: "There, you see!"—and when presently the two disappeared into the billiard-room, followed, at Charlotte's suggestion, by the boys and Eveline, for a game of 'Battle,' and Addy, who did not care for it and was not needed—sides being even already—was left behind with the two elder ladies, she could contain herself no longer.

"I am so glad I was mistaken," she drew close to Charlotte's mother and whispered, so that her aunt Helen should not hear, "so very, very glad."

"You had a good game, Drax?" said she, meeting him on the staircase presently. He was in a hurry to dress for dinner, having been out of doors by himself after the party broke up, and was now late. "Did you have a pleasant drive, too?" and she paused to hear.

"Famous!" cried he, rushing past.

The tenancy of Fairholme over, the Sunnings, whose visit had been paid during the latter part of the Rotherhams' stay there, had gone north; Drax returned to Town to relieve others of the management of affairs for a space; while the aunt before-mentioned undertook the charge of his sisters previous to their visit to the Dimsdales, where all were to meet again. We now find the latter ensconced there, awaiting the arrival of the rest, who had been re-united at another country house, whence they were to travel in company to Foxleigh Manor.

In came Sir Herbert and his following.

"What? Charlotte not come yet? Train must have been late. We expected to find them all here."

"The trains are usually late at this time," replied his wife. "They are so full with people going about."

"Aye, and the main line trains may have been late too," assented he; "ours is a branch, you see," to Adeline Rotherham, by whom he had seated himself, "an awful nuisance not being on a main line; however, what's that?" For even as he spoke, his ear caught the sound of wheels, and he was out of his chair in an instant.

Lady Henrietta was equally swift, and Kitty with a laughing "Aren't you coming, too?" followed—but Addy caught her sister back. Addy had instinctive good breeding. The two were alone, for the vicar's niece had left some time before, and a few breathless sentences could be interchanged.

"I do hope she won't be tired and cross."

"If she is, they will understand. Lady Henrietta and Kitty have just been talking about it. Of course, they know Charlotte as well—I mean better than we do."

"What do they say?"

"Oh, that—hush! here they come!" and both pairs of eyes were fastened on the doorway, through which could be heard the sound of approaching voices and footsteps, the meeting having taken place in the outer hall. Mrs. Sunning, talking volubly, was the first to appear, led in by her sister-in-law.

"So unfortunate. I said you would hardly care to have us without her, and Drax, dear fellow, was for sending a telegram, and remaining on till she was better. But I said you had been put off so often already—ah! my dears," as her young friends hastened forward, "you, too, will be disappointed, I fear. I feel quite vexed to be such a bearer of ill tidings. We have had to leave Charlotte behind. I have just explained to Lady Henrietta. But your brother is here, so all is not lost," laughing, and patting Adeline on the cheek.

As she spoke, Drax entered with the rest of the party.

"Isn't it too bad?" cried little Kitty, running in front of him. "Have you heard? What shall we do without Charlotte? We made sure she would come *this* time—but it was good of her not to keep the others, and she is to follow as soon as she is able."

"And that I am sure she will do," eagerly confirmed her mother; "she was sadly disappointed, and sent her love and all sorts of messages. Drax and I have been saying to each other that we should have but a sorry welcome; we should have liked to creep in by the back-door, we felt so guilty."

Protestations and re-assurances were here a matter of course, and these having been responded to, and Charlotte's love and lamentations again impressively distributed, the roll of the gong was felt by all to be a well-timed summons for the dispersal of the party.

"I say, I don't think some one I could name looked over well-pleased." The door between Lady Henrietta's bedroom and dressing-room opened, and a lathery face appeared round the corner, but seeing her ladyship's maid present, Sir Herbert hastily withdrew it again. "That woman is always there," muttered he.

By-and-bye, however, his name was called from within.

"Open the door, I am alone. What did you say? Was it about Mr. Rotherham?"

"I said he looked monstrously uncomfortable and ashamed. Take my word for it, Charlotte is up to some little game, and he knows it."

"Oh, my dear. The poor thing is ill in bed."

"She is always ill in bed when she does not want to go anywhere."

"But why should she not want on this occasion? We all know Charlotte *is* a little tiresome; she does not feel as others do about engagements——"

"Never keeps them unless she chooses, eh?"

"One can hardly wonder if she is a little spoilt. I thought it as well to give the Rotherham girls a hint about it. However, to-day I really cannot see why we should not believe——"

"Only that I don't," said Sir Herbert, bluntly; "and what's more, Rotherham doesn't."

Nevertheless, he was half inclined to alter his opinion in the course of the evening, and to conclude that Rotherham's apparent discomfiture was attributable merely to a sense of bringing disappointment to an affectionate and eagerly anticipating family party. Possibly he also felt that he and his sisters, having been invited on Charlotte's account, were, after a fashion, intruders in her absence. It certainly seemed that he brightened up under cordiality and geniality, and his refraining from any reference to an unpleasant subject was esteemed good taste.

In consequence, "I daresay I was mistaken," Sir Herbert's head again popped round the corner of his wife's door the moment he got upstairs. He never could keep his discoveries an instant to himself.

"Well, my dear Drax, I think I see a familiar handwriting"—and Mrs. Sunning playfully pointed to an envelope in her future son-in-law's hand. "How is our dear invalid—or, as I hope I may say, convalescent? What report does she send of herself?"

"Oh!—er!—very good," said he, hesitating and biting his lip, while at the same moment his eye glanced round to see if others were within earshot. Instinctively the widow moved a little further off. "Well?" she murmured, interrogatively.

"I—I don't quite know—this seems rather strange—at least I am afraid it will seem rather strange to *them*," said he, in an equally low voice, "perhaps you can help me? Of course, you and Charlotte know better about

such things; it seems that Charlotte has been invited to stop at a house near here, at the Duke's——"

"No! Really?"—in joyful accents.

"Oh, you think it is all right?"—he looked relieved.

"When I hear," said Mrs. Sunning, complacently. "She does stop there—at least, no, she never actually did that, but she has been to Chillingham from here—and the Duchess is quite a friend in Town, and often chaperons her—though *I* do not exactly know them, that is, I am not on visiting terms—however, let me hear, if you please," and she glanced impatiently at the letter which he had now unfolded. "You might just read out the part;" and, perceiving nothing better to do, he complied.

"Well, it seems all very nice and friendly, I am sure," said she. "You to go and meet her there, and find a pleasant little impromptu party. There is nothing very formidable about that, my dear Drax," misinterpreting his dubious brow. "You can be driven over. I am sure Sir Herbert will send you; it is but a dozen miles or so—not more than fifteen at any rate."

"It was not that I was thinking of, Mrs. Sunning." His eyes were still fixed upon the letter.

"You think *I* should have been asked? But old-fashioned ideas, you know——"

"Surely the Dimsdales will be hurt," he blurted out suddenly; "they are expecting her *here*; and we both assured them she would follow us, directly she was fit to travel. To go off on another visit——"

"My dear Drax, leave it to me. Henrietta," and the speaker briskly turned to address her sister-in-law, "Henrietta, my love, come and give us your opinion on an intricate case that puzzles our poor brains;" and the intricate case was explained in a manner that may be imagined by our readers.

"I daresay, now, Sir Herbert would feel just as Drax does," wound up Mrs. Sunning, smiling at him indulgently; "men are all alike, so—shall I say it?—terribly punctilious. Now we," here the smile was turned on Lady Henrietta, "we women take things as they come. It is all quite simple, is it not? Charlotte joins the Duchess's party for a day or two, and Drax meets her there this afternoon, and both come back here together—that is, if you are still good enough to wish to have this naughty girl of mine."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" cried Sir Herbert, coming up. "Charlotte is giving us the slip again. Well, well, Rotherham—so long as she doesn't give *you* the slip, ha, ha! Oh, we'll send you over easy enough. Oh, don't apologise. A duchess is a duchess, and Chillingham is a nice house to stop at. Rather a free and easy house, but perfectly respectable—at least, so I'm told. I have never stayed there myself. Mind you bring Charlotte back with you, though."

"Good Lord! I'm not going back with you!" Charlotte, all mischievous triumph at the success of her escapade, laughed in her lover's face as he delivered the message.

Obedient to her behest, he had been driven across country to a new neighbourhood the same afternoon, and duly met by her in the ducal halls.

"Haven't the Dimsdales given over expecting me yet?" cried she. "What tenacious clay that house must be built upon! And you to act as bird-catcher! You, whom I extricated! Who would have been stuck in the mud for ages if I hadn't got up this little plan for your benefit! I made the Duchess ask me, Drax; that is, I told Bobby, and he worked it."

"Now, don't be tiresome," continued she. "I know—I know all about it. You are fresh from the Dims-

dale influence ; it is sticking to your very coat ; I see it, and I bear with you. But just get rid of it as fast as you can. We are going to have a jolly time. They won't dance, because Bobby is too bad and hates it—do you remember, I told you? No, I don't suppose you do, but he is. We play little games instead. Very nice little games on a green board, and I know you will back my luck. I may draw on you, mayn't I?"—and a coaxing hand was laid on his coat sleeve.

Lord Robert Aguilar was very civil to Mr. Rotherham. The shooting was deuced bad, he was ashamed to offer it, but such as it was, etc. Should they have a game of billiards before dinner?

In the billiard-room he was presented to the other men, each and all of whom were laboriously polite—a trifle too laboriously perhaps, but Rotherham's thoughts were elsewhere, and he missed this. He agreed to whatever was suggested, played when he was invited, and joined the smokers when he was a looker-on.

At the close of the following day, Charlotte took him aside.

"You are a great success, Drax, as I knew you would be. But I don't choose to have you skinned any more, in spite of every one's praising you to the skies for the way you take your losses. You have lost all round, Bobby says. How's that? You don't play billiards badly, do you?"

"As well as the rest, but Lord Robert is immeasurably better than any of us."

"So he gets you to play with him? Of course." Her lip curled.

"Well, look here, Drax. I know you don't care about the money—no, I know you don't," anticipating a rejoinder. "Oh, I don't mean the paltry billiard-money, but the other—still, they have mulcted you pretty

severely, and your indifference—nothing could have been better. They can't say a single nasty thing of you when you go. But I think we have lost enough between us. What do you think?"

"Whatever you do."

"Very nice, I'm sure. You *are* good, Drax: too good for me, and that's a fact. I feel as if I had rather let you in for this. Still you have had some fun for your money, and, as you can afford it and don't mind——"

"I don't mind in the least."

"And you won't go talking about it?"

"Certainly not."

"All right; we'll be off to-morrow then. Let me see, where are you going?"

"If you are not going to the Dimsdales——" said he, "——there is no need for me to go either," he concluded his sentence.

"No need whatever;"—but she looked a shade surprised. "You don't care for Foxleigh? I should have thought it was the very place for you. Where do you go, then?"

"Back to Town; I am needed there; or, at any rate, they will be glad to have me."

"Capital. Yes, that is much better; much better. You might have been in a hole at the Dimsdales. Of course, they don't believe in my illness; and, between you and me, it was rather a threadbare excuse—but my invention was at a low ebb at the moment; so now you tell the Duchess you have had an urgent summons from the City—come, you needn't mind saying that—oh, well, put it your own way, if you object to my little *finesse*—only don't let them get round you. Stick to it, for they'll try. Bobby is disgustingly greedy, and when he scents filthy lucre, he is no good for anything else. I believe,

do you know, I really believe," naïvely, "that it was *you* more than *me* he wanted here!"

The truth was that Lord Robert had all but neglected her; that high play and not flirtation was the order of the day, and that, though this might have been endured had luck been with herself, it was not so amusing when she had to apply continually to her lover to replenish her coffers. That he took this for granted, and treated the matter as of no account, only made her pleased with him, not with herself, and Charlotte required to be pleased with herself. She was ready to quit Chillingham.

"I think it is about time these visits were over," she said at her next opportunity for confidence. "What about seeing to something else, Drax?"

"Anything you choose," said he.

"You very dense personage, don't you know what I mean? Must I put it plainer? When are we to be married, sir?"

"You said next month, did you not?"

"Well?"

"Well?"

"We are a funny couple, are we not?" said Charlotte, laughing. "We are grown so terribly matter-of-fact. There was a time, my friend, when you would have pressed——"

"But you told me November all along."

"So I did, and November draws nearer every day. There must be some sort of preparation for the great event. Oh, I know you have done your part, family arrangements and all that; but my clothes are quite as important in their way, and they are only half ordered. I must go to Paris," she stopped suddenly and looked at him.

"Shall you want me to take you there?" he said, quietly.

Charlotte thought for a moment.

"I don't—think so. Mother and I can run over by ourselves; and as we shall be shopping all day—no, I think we had better be by ourselves. But it was good of you to offer, Drax," she added, wondering a little. Drax sometimes puzzled her, and it was so very odd that she should be puzzled.

Just before he left, Drax took her aside.

"Isn't it usual for brides to wear lace, rather valuable and rare lace, on the wedding-dress?" he inquired. "I saw in the paper that at a wedding the other day, this was the—the gift of the bridegroom. Will you take it from me, Charlotte, and," putting into her hand a cheque, "choose it yourself?"

"Certainly Charlotte has got the very man for her," exclaimed the Duchess, on hearing this—Charlotte lost not a moment in displaying her trophy to all the ladies—"a thousand pounds to buy lace! Ridiculous! And I should not have said he was over head and ears," looking round suggestively. One or two others had fancied also that Drax was not 'over head and ears,' but surely his devotion was now most satisfactorily and practically attested.

"That is the way I should like a man to be in love with me," cried a rapacious little roulette player, bursting with envy.

Charlotte herself was intensely pleased. She had already diamonds and pearls, besides costly knick-knacks innumerable to parade as love tokens, but just at the moment something fresh and spontaneous was desirable.

Perhaps he guessed this. He smiled as he responded to all the gay farewells on the doorstep; but it was not a smile for any one to see.

"Dear me, dear me! those young people!" cried Mrs.

Sunning, all in a bustle the next day. "I am sure a mother with a daughter like Charlotte—what do you think is her latest?" addressing the company generally, and waving a little perfumed note as she spoke. "After prohibiting my making any plans for the wedding, and always saying there was time enough, and that she would take it in hand directly these autumn visits on which she had set her heart were over, it now appears that she and her hot-headed lover (excuse me, my dear girls," to his sisters, who, with the rest, were silently listening) "have put their heads together and done their best to startle us all. The day is fixed—the 21st; and Charlotte wishes us both to be off to Paris to-morrow, to get the rest of the trousseau. It quite takes one's breath away."

"She is certainly a very spasmodic young person," said Sir Herbert, coolly. "Not coming here at all, then?"

Even Henny-Penny looked disconcerted. It was Kitty who came to the rescue.

"Don't you know that nobody is anybody when it's a case of wedding? Girls are always like that," she cried. "Peggy Orpington was just the same. And so should we all be, if we had the chance. Do, aunt Cis, tell us what Charlotte says. And is there anything about the bridesmaids' dresses?"

There was nothing however; nor was the gift of lace alluded to; and in the midst of her joyful preparations Mrs. Sunning turned the little note once or twice over in her hands.

"Charlotte is really getting too regardless of appearances," muttered she, to herself; "not a word about her visit, not a message of any sort to the Dimsdales, and orders me about as if I were a servant! 'Meet me at the Charing Cross Hotel,' reading aloud, "'and cash a cheque beforehand.'"

"If it were not for this marriage," continued the widow, tapping her fingers on the table, "I should—but really I am only too thankful to do anything that fixes this marriage to a definite date. Charlotte has been so very erratic lately—more so than ever—that sometimes I hardly know what to think. I am sure I ought to be willing to go to Paris, or anywhere," and she gave her orders with renewed alacrity.

"So here you are!" said Charlotte, on meeting. "That's all right. I've written for rooms to the 'Palais,' and we shall have a good time."

"But, my love, you did rather—ahem!—throw us into confusion."

"I thought I should, and Henny-Penny in confusion is a fearful and wonderful spectacle. I could not face it; and you must have had a blessed deliverance from them all."

"They were most kind, and deeply interested, Charlotte. They will come up the week before the wedding, so that the house may be ready——"

"What house? Are we to have their house for it?"

"We are indeed!"—exultant. "I have kept it as a little surprise for you. Aunt Hen is really the kindest creature."

"Yes, yes, I know; and I quite expected it of her—at least I did at the first, but I forgot about it lately."

"Considering how you treated them——"

"Bother! I can't be always 'considering'. This is your room," said Charlotte, abruptly.

She was in a brusque, odd humour; one minute rattling and discursive, throwing about questions and comments without pausing for the intermediate answer; the next relapsing into silent abstraction, and waking up with a laugh, to profess herself forgetful of where she was, where she had been, and where she was going. Paris,

was it? Of course; she was really so tired and 'rushed,' she seemed to know nothing about anything, and, what was worse, she hadn't enjoyed herself one bit of late.

But Paris would be heavenly. Paris would make amends for everything. In Paris one could breathe. One wasn't caught up at every turn with 'What are you about?' 'Who have you been with?' As if people always wanted to say what they were about and who they had been with! All the supervision and espionage that went on in England——"

"My love, what are you talking about?" cried Mrs. Sunning, in amazement. "If ever a girl had the most absolute independence——"

"Tut! I don't mean you," muttered Charlotte.

It turned out that the Duchess had questioned her, Lady Mitcham had questioned her, all the people she met at all the houses had worried and fretted her, and though she had behaved as well as possible——

"Hum!" ejaculated the widow, involuntarily.

"There, you are like the rest. I can't speak to a man that they don't nod, and wink, and whisper to each other"—her nostrils twitched excitedly. There was excitement and mutiny in her whole air.

"Lord Tarporley, I suppose?" Mrs. Sunning looked at her daughter and breathed the words so softly as scarce to be heard.

"Tarpy is as sick of that girl as I always knew he would be. And then, just because he turned to me and liked to talk to me as an old friend, there was a fuss made. Never mind, it's an old story now."

"You have not seen nor heard anything of him since I left you at the Mitchams'?"

"Nothing. It wasn't likely at the Duke's. Bobby took care of that."

"Then, my dear child, what in the name of wonder

do you disturb yourself for? You know we talked about this before, and I advised you not to mention Lord Tarporley's name to Drax. When you two old friends are both happily married, you will meet in the pleasantest manner possible, and flirt as much as you please," laughing; "but really until we return to London for the wedding-day I must keep you under my own eye, you are so foolish and impulsive. At any rate, I am glad you leave Lord Tarporley in England."

"Are you?" said Charlotte. Something in her look and voice struck a chill through her hearer's veins. . . .

It was the wedding-eve. Picture the scene. Any one can who chooses, and we will leave the whole to the reader's imagination.

Drax Rotherham had snatched a few minutes from the uproar, to hide himself in the solitude of his own room; and, having shut the door, and thrown open the window to cool his brow with the mild air of a November twilight, folded his arms and leaned without.

God! what misery was there in that man's heart! Did any suspect it? Possibly. Did any dare to whisper a syllable of it? No.

To no human ear had one iota of his terrible secret ever been confided: as his own hand had filled his cup of bitterness, so would he drink it: as he himself had conjured into being all the hideous future as well as all the wretched present, so he would flinch from neither.

He took one comfort to himself: he satisfied Charlotte. She might torture him; every fresh revelation of herself was a torture; but so steadfast and deep-rooted was his conviction that he had no right either to expostulate or condemn, so great was his shame in her, so overwhelming his retribution in her, that all the forces of his nature were gathered together in one

supreme effort—he would not add to the evil already committed.

It seemed to him a long, long time since he had ever ventured into the presence of others without wearing a mask. He had not affected gaiety; but there had been a steady front, a resolute and most minute fulfilment of every recognised law, an anticipation of Charlotte's wishes and solicitude for her welfare, which had, he trusted, deceived even herself.

Deception? Yes, he had stooped to that. Right or wrong he had carried it on unflinchingly. Never a demur had escaped his lips. He had been her slave.

And this was but the prelude; it was that which made his soul shudder and sicken. Love already dead, and the long hypocrisy of wedded life not yet begun!

Poor Pennington, of whom he was now forever thinking, once told him that disillusionment in his case had set in by slow and hesitating degrees, after the marriage vows were spoken. It had taken—how long had it taken?—not less than a year or two he fancied, before the husband realised what sort of a woman he had got for a wife—whereas his own awakening had been but the work of months, he had almost said of weeks.

There had been a flash of delirium, when all was rainbow-hued and the commonest events of daily life transformed—and then?—then a little pain, nothing to speak of—a passing twinge—he had easily reasoned it away.

But it came again, sharper, and lasted longer. Alban's words, half-forgotten and deemed at the time exaggerated and inapplicable, recurred to memory with cruel distinctness. Alban had pointed out defects upon the fair surface, and he had been forced to own—and it hurt him, of course it hurt him to do so—that the defects did exist.

Now it was a sentiment, now an avowed purpose ; again but an airy word, a glance of contempt, a laugh—the gradual unrolling of the sealed book whose outside had been so fair, whose pages were so soiled and poison-stained—he cast his eye backward upon it all, and, ere he knew, one single bitter sob burst from his bosom. . . .

First, there had been the early instinct ; he recalled the impression Charlotte made on him when with a sense of injustice he had traced the curious, subtle resemblance between her and the wife of his unfortunate friend ; following on this had been the warning received with incredulity, and attributed to the over-rigidity of narrow-minded prejudice ; lastly, he had in his heart set the world at defiance. The world took Charlotte at her own valuation—did not and could not know her as he alone did. . . .

Charlotte herself misjudged herself ; was ignorant of her undeveloped capacity for all that was noble and good. In a purer atmosphere such qualities and graces as were now but seedlings would thrive and ripen. She had bewailed their non-existence, and he had tenderly reassured her, prophesying such a future that she had smiled—he knew now what that smile meant. . . .

What a home theirs would be!—the very word was a mockery. Already he had promised, in accordance with her wishes, things of which he had spoken to no one, yet which would presently have to be acknowledged and acted upon, to the grief and bewilderment of those who had loved and trusted him from their earliest days. He could not, indeed, have expected, and perhaps would hardly have wished, that his young sisters should be permanent dwellers beneath his roof—but their total banishment, and that to a distance—"For I cannot have them running in and out," she said—had not been anticipated, and he had fought against it. Fought, but ulti-

mately yielded. He had not, however, told them. "You can go to aunt Helen for a time," was all he had had the courage to say.

He wondered dully now whether there might not be some reason for the absolute silence about their future which was maintained by Addie and Evie? Not a question had they ever asked.

The boys were jubilant, full of the wedding fun. A blythesome bustle pervaded the house. Hark! a tap at the door now—was it to summon him to some gay conference?

He had promised to go to the Dimsdales' house, where the bride's relations were mustering, and where Charlotte, admired of all admirers, would be the cynosure of every eye—(oh, poor Jack Pennington! poor Jack Pennington!—that dreary face so like his own, now that he saw it in the glass!)—he was taking a hasty survey preparatory to facing the ordeal, when a note in Charlotte's handwriting was handed him, and presuming it contained a request which might have to be attended to before joining the party, he opened it mechanically.

What he read was as follows:—

"DEAR DRAX,

"Do not regret me, for I am not worth it. I made a mistake about you, and so did Lord Tarporley about Miss Vancouver. We have both found this out, and were married to each other an hour ago. Go for particulars to your friend Alban, and please forgive,

"Yours truly,

"CHARLOTTE TARPORLEY."

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

REELING like a drunken man, Rotherham staggered into the presence of his friend.

Alban was alone in the vestry of his church, from which a congregation was streaming out—for it chanced that he had commenced that afternoon a series of Advent lectures—and he was still in his surplice when the expected visitor on whose account he had hastened the departure of others opened the door.

To his speechless consternation, he had been called upon to perform a furtive marriage ceremony within the hour preceding the above-named service, and had done so—having no choice—but it is probable that even Charlotte felt the mute horror of his look.

She had suggested applying to him from a complicity of motives, chief among which was the certainty of obtaining a swift fulfilment of her behest—a notification of the lecture having fallen beneath her eye—while delay might have been occasioned by seeking out another clergyman; but she had also offered Alban a few words of explanation, or what she termed such, which could be passed on to Drax Rotherham. Such was the curious texture of this woman's mind, that while putting upon her lover this dire affront and inflicting on him, as she conceived, this bitter pain, she yet sought to shield him from a slight exposure as to which he gave no thought.

"My poor fellow!" said Alban, and stopped short, with his hand held out.

Between him and Rotherham there had been a complete suspension of intercourse ever since the latter's engagement; and this without any apparent rupture, owing to the lengthy absences from Town first of one and then of the other—so that, however each might have been conscious of avoidance, it did not take any open and tangible form.

Alban had only returned from a distant mission within the past day or two, to find among his letters a silver-lettered invitation, which had been thrust out of sight unanswered. When the wedding was over it would be time enough to think of appearances.

Profound emotion was now depicted on his countenance.

"Rotherham, no words can express what I feel for you."

"It's—it's true, then?" agitated to such an extent that he could scarcely articulate. "Tell me, is it true?" repeated Rotherham, his white face and staring eyes confronting the grave, sorrowful countenance of his friend.

"True. Too true. It took place in this church—I am ashamed to speak of it—only two hours ago. You have heard from her?"

"This," said Rotherham, holding out the note he had received. It shook like a leaf in his hands. Alban perused and returned it in silence.

"Tell me," said Rotherham, fixing upon him two burning eyes, "that this marriage-service—you performed it of course?—you *must* know; you would not trifle with me; you would not lend yourself to—Alban, say it was no cruel hoax, no jest——"

"Jest!"

"It was in there, you say"—his eye went towards the door. "And before the altar? And you saw him put the ring upon her finger, and it was a true marriage, binding and irrevocable before God and man? You swear this?"

Alban bowed his head.

"Not because of anything *I* may have done, Alban? Not from any failure on my part to—to?—"

"On your part? My poor fellow, you are dazed, and no wonder. On your part? No, indeed. There was no suggestion of such an idea. Rotherham, the injury done you can only be regarded as a piece of madness, wanton madness, wanton folly, wanton cruelty. Charlotte will repent this as long as she lives. She came to me to aid her in it; and as Lord Tarporley produced a special licence properly prepared, I could not legally refuse, though my soul revolted from the act. I was compelled by my sacred office to unite those two, each of whom had treacherously betrayed another. It was horrible—horrible!"

"But it is done? They are actually married?"

"They are; there was no help for it."

"Thank God!" Rotherham fell into a chair and covered his face with his hands, while Alban, almost fearing that the shock had mentally unhinged the unfortunate victim of such perfidy, stood regarding him with the utmost compassion, at a loss what course to pursue.

After a few minutes thus spent, however, he was about to offer some attempt at consolation, when, to his renewed amazement, the bowed head was suddenly raised, and Rotherham himself opened his lips, and no longer either looked or spoke wildly.

"I am not suffering as you imagine, Alban. You think I am crushed beneath this blow," continued the

speaker, with gathering firmness and coherence; "I am not. I am dumb beneath the mercy of God!"

Alban started and listened intently.

"I had no right to look for deliverance," proceeded Rotherham. "No right, none." He shook his head to emphasise the words. "I, disregarding all warnings—for you were not alone in warning me—disregarding the voice of my own conscience—I am no boy, Alban, and have seen the misery of such marriages—of one in particular, the memory of which was never quite to be got rid of, try as I might and did—I, with my eyes open, with no excuse, no extenuation—I *would* have her, cost what it might. Am I not right in saying I deserved my fate?"

"Your—fate?"

"I thought no human power could save me from it, or rather that no human power *should*. It had got to go on. On and on. While life lasted. You say she made no complaint of me, Alban. I hope and trust she felt none! I hid in the very depths of my soul its agony—but can you understand *now*?"—he broke off suddenly.

"Dimly I do. You had begun to regret——"

"Begun! I was in hell an hour ago. There was not a thought, not a remembrance which was not torture. But mind, no escape. Had Charlotte been true to me, I would, so help me God! have been true to her. It was that which kept me away from you," continued Rotherham, drawing a deep breath; "I was afraid of what you or others might urge me to do; and come what might, I was determined to fulfil my contract. Charlotte is what she always was. It was I, I alone, who was to blame." His voice died away, his head sank upon his breast.

Absorbed in his own emotions, perhaps it was as well

that he did not perceive the expression on the countenance of his friend.

And he never knew—for why tell him?—that he had once been the subject of envy too deep for words, and that beneath the calm, impassive exterior which was such a contrast to his own, a volcano had once burned.

From earliest manhood Alban had struggled with his love for Charlotte. There were times when he deemed its force diminished if not extinguished, but so surely as he did so, and ventured again within the sphere of her influence, he rued his rashness.

It must not, nevertheless, be imagined that he had been consciously actuated by any unworthy motive in seeking to dissuade Drax Rotherham from yielding to the same passion. Principle and reason alike urged him to pursue the course he had taken, and it was only when he perceived all persuasion and admonition vain that the secret of his own heart revealed itself in a burst of jealous anguish.

Why should Rotherham be so happy and so credulous? It took all his strength to master, both in Rotherham's presence and in that of his sister Olivia, the bitterness of his dismay and apprehension.

And now, at last, he knew that it was not the Charlotte he had denounced so unsparingly to others whom he most feared and dreaded for himself in the future, but a being purified and sanctified by the holy influence of the marriage tie, a loved and loving woman, a regenerated soul, over whom the angels in heaven were rejoicing.

He had dwelt upon this picture until it seemed to him that Drax Rotherham's faith and clear-sightedness exceeded his own; whereupon he had sedulously endeavoured to prepare himself for the contemplation of his friend's felicity—so that the shattering of the house of cards fell upon him with the force of a stunning blow,

and every thought of self was swallowed up in sympathy with that other whose feelings he shuddered to conceive.

"I am going home now," said Rotherham.

A long time had passed, and he was still in Alban's presence—grave, subdued, and strangely peaceful.

Outside, the darkness of a November night had fallen, and he was going—home; he could speak the word and smile.

The two clasped hands anew and separated, each willing to be alone, yet with a feeling that a barrier had been broken down between them—a barrier which would never again be raised.

"Come to-morrow, won't you?" said Alban, following the departing footsteps. "Come as you once did, and let me go to you as I did. In the future——"

"Yes. In the future——" There was no need of further words.

It might have been supposed that a trying ordeal still awaited the deeply injured Rotherham, but he was so unconscious of it that he walked straight in through his own doorway with no more hesitation than he would have felt at any other time, and the elaborate precautions of his sympathisers were thrown away upon him.

The dining-room door was open, and the smaller table, set out for dinner, could be seen within; while a whispering group of servants huddled together out of sight as the master of the house passed.

"They know," he said to himself—but nothing could affect him.

In his exquisite sense of relief and peace he was beyond the reach of lesser emotions, and the red eyes of his sisters, who hastened to throw themselves into his arms, only awoke a tender regret that he could not for decency's sake do more than silently kiss them in return.

"The boys stayed on in Seamore Place," whispered Addy. "We thought, perhaps—the Dimsdales were so kind, they said that perhaps you would rather have only us, Evie and me. Oh, Drax!"

"When did you hear?" said he, softly.

They had heard about the same time that he did. A messenger had arrived instead of Charlotte, who had remained behind with her mother in Charles Street, avowedly superintending the finishing touches to the packing of her trunks, but who must have quitted the house immediately she was alone, and, joined by Lord Tarporley, driven to the church where the marriage ceremony was performed.

At Seamore Place a large family party was assembled, and the scene could be imagined. Mrs. Sunning had gone into hysterics.

"We thought we had better come away as soon as we could," murmured Adeline. "They were all looking at us, and every minute you were expected, and oh! we were so thankful you did not come!—but when we did not find you here either——"

"Were you frightened? Poor little girls."

"Tomlinson said you had gone to Mr. Alban's. I don't know how he knew. So when we heard *that*, we did not mind; I mean we were not afraid. Mrs. Sunning raged against Mr. Alban for—for—so that told us why you went to him."

He nodded. Later in the evening he grew restless.

"I want those boys."

When they came, shy and frightened, dreading intensely the sight of the brother to whom so awful a thing had happened, Drax could scarce repress a smile, it all seemed so strange to him.

"Sit down, lads."

They flew for chairs and placed them round him,

and he looked into their faithful, adoring faces, and a great wave of emotion surged through his veins.

"This that has happened," said he—three brown heads nodded comprehension, while the girls drew near and leaned upon the speaker's shoulder—"has made you all dearer than ever to me. I would rather not speak of it in any other way; but I want you to understand if you can, that you have got your brother back again, who has been, and might have been still more, lost to you, had to-morrow been what it promised to be. I have been through very deep waters, and God only knows what might have been the end of it, if all had gone as I once fondly hoped and expected. You know how I loved her"—every eye was on the floor—"I doubt if she ever loved me"—a smothered groan of execration. "We are better, far better, apart; but if you ever think of Charlotte," he took a hand in each of his, and looked into every face by turn, "think of her as I do—with kindness and forgiveness in your hearts."

"Some one said she was in love with Lord Tarporley all along," burst forth Huby, and shrank into himself before the indignant and covert buffetings of the others. Drax alone spoke:—

"Perhaps, my boy," he said, gently. . . .

Mrs. Sunning was at first perfectly petrified, and then wildly incensed by what had taken place. She had laid her own schemes for the future, and a secret conviction that her influence over her daughter would remain undiminished had been one cause of the favour Drax Rotherham found in her eyes as a harmless, inoffensive son-in-law. Charlotte's growing indifference to him had been easily penetrated, and if judiciously turned to account, her mother judged that she would soon be indispensable to her.

On the other hand, though Lord Tarporley was a

poor man as compared with Rotherham, he was still 'a lord'. There had been a time when attentions from him were eagerly looked for, and she was well aware that the attitude adopted by Charlotte towards him covered a mortifying sense of failure.

"One cannot exactly blame the poor child"—she wiped her eyes now.

"*Cannot* one?" thundered Sir Herbert Dimsdale. He had just caught a glimpse of the array of wedding presents in his own library, from which he had been turned out to make room.

The widow resumed:—

"She always did like Lord Tarporley, always. He had an extraordinary fascination——"

"Fascination! A dissipated, blear-eyed *roué*! A sickly, effeminate hop-o'-my-thumb! Be bound he has a disease about him—hasn't that skin for nothing. How Charlotte, with Rotherham before her eyes——"

"Mind before matter." Again Mrs. Sunning feebly strove to stem the torrent. "Lord Tarporley may not be handsome, but he is extremely clever, witty, and amusing——"

"Bah!" cried Sir Herbert, with a roar of contempt. "Clever, witty, amusing?—a fig for them all; and, if it comes to that, and you choose to call a kind of cheap cynicism wit, you may find that in every club in London. So I told Charlotte once, when I found that sort of talk going down with her. Have it as you please, then, have it as you please," as she again interposed. "Say he is clever, say he is witty, say he is anything you like but an honourable, straightforward man—but, by George! when I think of it I could kick the scoundrel! And look here," continued the worthy baronet, turning the fire of his wrath on his discomfited sister-in-law's own head, "you may make what excuses you choose for your

daughter to those who will listen, but once for all you must hold your tongue about her to me. She shall never darken my doors again."

"Perhaps her mother had better darken them no longer either," said the widow, rising and trembling with resentment. "The tone you take, Sir Herbert, is ridiculous, perfectly ridiculous! Charlotte might have committed an outrage on society——"

"She may do that yet," muttered he, between his teeth.

But, as usual, Lady Henrietta here intervened as peacemaker.

"At a moment like this!" she reproachfully drew her husband aside; "and the poor thing is really to be pitied. Pray, pray do not let her go away in anger. Take her round to Charles Street, and," in a still lower tone, as he eventually and most reluctantly prepared to obey, "find out, if you can, how it came about."

"What? You don't know?" The walk assumed a new aspect.

It took less than ten minutes, so he span it out.

"I'm an outspoken old fellow, Cecilia, and I daresay I hurt your feelings just now. But we two need have no quarrel with each other; and—hum!—ha!—you may as well tell me anything you can that will throw light on this mysterious affair. Of course, we could all see it was a shock to you; but had you any inkling of it, I don't say lately, but at any previous time?"

Mrs. Sunning quickly adjusted her 'inkling'.

"I must own, yes, Sir Herbert."

"And still you—but let us hear how and when," he caught himself up, and gulped down a fresh explosion.

"I could not but see that dear Charlotte was disappointed in Mr. Rotherham. He has no ability, no *esprit*, and she has been accustomed to so much. At

Fairholme she complained that his society bored her—while yet he was most good and devoted—oh, dear! she will not have such a generous, lavish husband in Lord Tarporley ;” she sighed a very real sigh for the flesh-pots of Egypt. “I had to soothe her down as best I could. I represented to her that one did not always want that kind of flippant badinage——”

“And yet you call it wit?”

“Charlotte does. She used to say that it was not what Lord Tarporley himself said, but what he made her say, which charmed and exhilarated her. She found him, she said, inspiring.”

“I daresay. They gossiped and scandalled together. Well, how did she take that? What happened next?”

“We went to stay with the Tarporleys. Old Lady Tarporley had often asked us, but last year Charlotte did not care to go. I fancy she felt chagrined; then she took a new turn this autumn, and overruled all my objections. I could do nothing with her. Go she would. As Miss Vancouver was there, I supposed it would be all right.”

“And it wasn’t? I’ll come in for a moment, Cecilia,” as they had now reached their goal. “Was the old flirtation resumed then?”

“Not at first. Or—invisibly; I don’t know—I can’t tell; Charlotte did not confide in me; and I only felt that I was glad to get her out of the house without, as I supposed, mischief being done. She seemed to get over it; and we went about among other people; and Mr. Rotherham, as you saw, joined us. But Lord Tarporley was at the Mitchams’,” reluctantly, “when we left Charlotte there, to go to you.”

“When she pretended to be ill!”

“And though there was no appearance of anything between the two,” continued she, affecting not to hear,

"I did not like it. I urged Charlotte to send him away. She could have done so, but she laughed at me—and I must own that as long as Mr. Rotherham was there she behaved with discretion. He saw nothing."

"He looked pretty blank when he came to us, however."

"That was merely owing to his scruples. He was always so tiresome about his scruples; indeed, he wore poor Charlotte out with them; she had not been accustomed to—to——"

"Regarding other people's feelings," said Sir Herbert, grimly.

"Perhaps not. Perhaps I did spoil her." The widow fell back upon a plaintive note. "She certainly had grown very headstrong of late, and sometimes I wondered at Mr. Rotherham's patience," continued she, surprised into honesty, "considering, you know——"

"Considering his fine, straightforward character. Excuse me. I took a liking to the fellow from the first, and now I shall be ashamed to look him in the face! I shall write to him instead."

"Do. And say from me all that is kind——"

"Good-bye, good-bye. No, I think you must do your own—lying," as he got outside the door.

Rotherham, as we know, cared little for what any one said or wrote, but so far as any expressions of friendship could affect him, he was gratified by the attitude of the whole Dimsdale family. He preferred not to meet them, or any of Charlotte's relations, for the present, however; and as long as the affair was the talk of the Town secluded himself from view.

One day he came in with a more than usually cheerful aspect.

"I have heard of something that just suits me, and I hope none of you will mind. Alban has decided to

accept a three years' appointment in Australia for the sake of his health—the doctors say he simply must go—and the idea is that I should accompany him for the trip. I should stay for a couple of months and be back in the spring."

"When do you go?" said Adeline, in rather a peculiar voice.

"Immediately. Shall you mind? You will stay here, and can have aunt Helen——" In a few minutes all was arranged.

When the wanderer returned, he was not surprised to find that the march of events had not stood still in his absence. Sir George Tregillis met him on the threshold of his own door, ready for the welcome of a brother, which was cordially extended, and without any attempt at explanation it was tacitly understood between the two what had caused the apparently erratic conduct of Adeline's *fiancé* in the past.

"I send you the news with the most heartfelt satisfaction," wrote Rotherham to his friend. "You, who have known Tregillis so much longer than I, don't need to be told what a good fellow he is at bottom, though he formed one of a fast set for a time—a fact he now regrets, and I may add that he has broken with it for good and all."

To his wife Tregillis owned that he had come near wrecking himself on the self-same enchanted rock which had proved so disastrous to Drax; and it is probable that she listened with feminine incomprehension and disapprobation—but since she could unite her husband and her brother in the same, she wisely felt the matter to be beyond her ken, and let it rest.

It was about a year after his marriage that Sir George was one day in his club, when he perceived approaching

him one of his particular aversions in the shape of Colonel Blake.

It was useless to hold up a barricading newspaper, for the old gossip was not to be baulked, and drew up a chair with a mysterious and significant lowering of the voice.

"Heard about the Tarporleys, I suppose?"

A grunt of assent from behind the paper, the reader's eyes glued to it.

"It was bound to come, you know. I never thought she would stick to him; but 'pon my soul, she might have hung on a bit longer. Tarpy would be easy enough to get on with."

"I should imagine so"—coldly.

"You used to know him pretty well."

"I don't now; and, to say the truth, I'd rather not discuss him." Suddenly Tregillis folded and flattened out the paper. "Lord Tarporley's affairs are nothing to me."

"To be sure, he, he! I forgot at the moment that you——"

"There's no need to forget or remember anything," Tregillis, very red in the face and straight in the back, sat up on the edge of his chair. "I simply don't choose to be interested in the Tarporleys."

"They won't be 'the Tarporleys' much longer. He will get his divorce without the slightest difficulty. The case won't be defended——"

Sir George got up and walked away.

"Stuck-up brute!" muttered the old dandy. "No manners; never had any."

He reflected a few minutes, and also left the club, his feet mechanically taking the way to Charles Street, for he was one of the few who still found a species of magnetism in the little house up the narrow way—

but closed shutters and windows now awaited him there.

"She's off," said Olivia Jephson, to whom he went next. "We have seen the last of her and Charlotte."

"You don't mean to say they are together?"

"Together? Oh, no;" a short laugh. "Very much no. Have you not noticed a change in Mrs. Sunning of late?" and Olivia surveyed him out of her shrewd, half-shut eyes. "Have you not observed how entirely Lady Tarporley has dropped out of her conversation? It is no longer 'dear Charlotte' and 'the poor child'—the widow stiffens and bristles at the very sound of her daughter's name; and my belief is that they turned her out of the house on one occasion. Tarpy always hated her, and never made the least attempt to hide it. She would have done better with 'The Colonial'."

"'The Colonial'?" said he, inquiringly.

"Tarpy's name for Drax Rotherham, and what *we* always called him. By the way, how completely he has slipped out of our set. Of course, one expected he would for a time; but after he came back from Australia, and people had forgotten, it would have been all right; he might have started again as if nothing had happened."

"I often see him," said the Colonel, "driving about. He looks very fit; not at all heart-broken. He has joined the Coaching Club, his brother-in-law, Tregillis, tells me."

"George Tregillis! He is another deserter. He never comes near me now. And both those men call themselves my brother's friends!"—bitterly.

"My dear lady, you and your brother are not precisely one"—but meeting no response to his flattering intonation—"how is Alban?" inquired the Colonel, substituting friendly solicitude for the sly smile.

"Sebastian is well enough; there was never anything

much the matter with him. The doctors made a fuss, and he had a fancy to go; but he has had enough of it, and will be back in London telling us our sins again before we have committed half enough to satisfy him. I shall have hard work to complete my tale. Charlotte, however, ought to get full marks."

"A bad business." The old fellow shook his head solemnly. "Hum!—ah!—yes. A bad business."

"What do people say?"

"I spoke to Tregillis just now. I wanted to find out from him how Rotherham took it, but——" he shook his head again.

"George Tregillis is like one of his own turnips," said Olivia, impatiently. "You may hack and hew him into small pieces, and he still remains a turnip, and nothing but a turnip all through. A very sulky turnip he can be, too."

"I got nothing out of him. He as good as told me to mind my own business."

Olivia thought for a moment. Blake's set was, she fondly hoped, her set, and he would certainly go the round of it with his peddling tongue. It would be something to be quoted as his authority, and she swiftly decided to fill his pack.

Accordingly, he was soon in a position to announce positively that Lord and Lady Tarporley had been hoodwinking the world as to their domestic felicity for some time past; that though the former was a peaceable man, his wife had played too risky a game with him; that the latter's mother had been in constant terror of a rupture, yet durst not attempt to interfere, since such was Charlotte's impatience of control that it grew finally to undisguised hostility, and the two rarely saw each other.

"Charlotte had quite cast her mother off. I know that for a fact," asserted Colonel Blake's informant,

"and though I don't exactly know it, I am pretty sure that there was a great quarrel lately, and Mrs. Sunning was bundled off when she had gone down to them to stay. She came back in a hurry, and in a very bad temper; railing at the ingratitude of children for whom their parents had sacrificed themselves, etc., etc.—so this *esclandre* only makes her furious, especially as she will have it she is left to bear the brunt."

"So she skedaddles, too," said the Colonel, shrugging his shoulders. "Clever little woman to be off before it gets out! When did she go?"

"Last night, by the mail train from Victoria. I saw her in the afternoon. She was very hot, and not very nice to look at. Had forgotten half her war-paint. I don't fancy she wanted to see me; but I was inside before she knew, and got her plans out of her. Oh, yes; she is off. Off and done for! The house is in the agent's hands, the furniture is to be stored, and pouf! the whole thing vanishes into thin air. Mrs. Sunning will never appear in London again."

"Ah!" said the Colonel, regretfully.

He could not but regret the sunny little drawing-room with the two sparkling women in it; and the recent defalcations of two-thirds of its frequenters was all to the good in so far as he was concerned.

He had even gone so far as to meditate at one time taking a step which the substitution of Lord Tarporley for Drax Rotherham as Charlotte's bridegroom prevented coming into effect. The former did not see money matters in the light the latter would have done, and Charlotte was not desired to leave her mother in full possession of the income to the half of which the bride was entitled on her marriage.

In consequence, the appearance of a somewhat problematical 'cousin' from the other side of the Atlantic

beneath the widow's roof, who required a vast amount of entertaining and chaperonage, was popularly supposed to be the result of an advertisement by 'The mother of a peeress,' and it is not unlikely that the final estrangement between Lady Tarporley and her adroit parent had to do with this enterprise.

Be this as it may, Colonel Blake was content to subside once more into the family friend without having committed himself, and many a little dinner and theatre-party was the consequence.

He was now genuinely distressed that the widow's day was over and mentally confounded himself that, with a risk of this always in view, he had not 'hedged'; he ought to have got a foothold in Carlton House Terrace while yet things were pleasant all round.

Now both Charlotte and her mother had disappeared for ever so far as the gay, great world was concerned—and that world was growing very small for him, and very cool towards him. It was a nuisance.

The sight of Rotherham's stately figure on the box-seat of his drag, a merry party filling every inch behind, was an eyesore. Rotherham's name in lists of ostensible personages on committees and Boards was an annoyance. He seemed never to be able to get away from the fellow.

But enough of Blake. The contemptible twaddler, shunned and despised by all, yet still clinging feebly to the brighter past, and blinking his eyes before the dread future, is not a pleasant spectacle—we, too, prefer to turn aside when the old figure is seen coming up the street.

A shade always crosses Drax Rotherham's brow when he espies the thin, grey face, or any other face with which he must always associate an episode in his life not yet too remote to be recalled without a pang. He has

never once walked up Charles Street since a certain day.

Otherwise he is a happy, contented man. His affairs are prospering; he is rich in friends; there is perfect unanimity and concord in his home; and his heart is at peace with God. His young half-brothers are growing up, and he is so immensely proud of their achievements (for all three have mentally and intellectually far outstripped himself) that he is never at a loss for something to talk about. Eveline heads his house; but Sir George and Lady Tregillis are constant visitors, and latterly the baby has accompanied them. Drax is most particular about the baby, and of course Adeline thinks there never was such a godfather. When his friend Alban returns to England, an event to be speedily anticipated, there will be nothing left for Drax Rotherham to wish for.

In appearance he is a little older looking than when we first saw him, but it is a noble face, and the deepening of expression supplies all that may ever have been felt lacking in it. Hal, who passed with great distinction into Woolwich the other day, avers that all the fellows at 'the Shop' rave about his big brother's looks.

The latter did not go to South Africa when all the world was pouring out there, but for some reason or other he is treated with great respect by the heads of various war departments. It was urgent business connected with one of these which prevented his joining a party got up by his brother-in-law one day last summer to dine at the Crystal Palace and see the fireworks.

Sir George loves this sort of entertainment, and on the occasion referred to presided over a jocund party with the utmost zeal and good humour—but the dessert was barely begun ere his fond wife perceived that something was amiss.

The jolly host was no longer mirthful and a promoter of mirth in others—he was restless and *distract*, answering at random when spoken to, and sinking into silence when not addressed.

Presently she had a slip of paper handed to her.

"It is too hot to stay up here," cried she; "let us see the fireworks from outside"—and almost before the words were spoken, Tregillis was hustling every one along.

"What was it, George?" demanded she, presently. "I was not at all sorry to come away, for those objectionable people at the corner table were getting worse and worse. That woman with the shrieking laugh! She would *not* be quiet. I could not see her, but I could see the dreadful men with the dreadful faces applauding and exciting her, and she was the only woman there! I think," lower, "I think they were all drinking a good deal. But, George——" she stopped, surprised by his compressed lips. "What is it, George? Was it because of them we had to come away? I never thought of that. You did not know those people?"

"Not 'those people'. I knew her."

"The woman? Did you? Did you really? But she did not seem quite—quite——" hesitating. "I should never have thought she was a person one *could* know."

"She is not!"

She caught his hand.

"George, *who* is she?"

Sir George looked at her very gravely.

"She was Lady Tarporley once," he said.

W174.2

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